FROM ANTI-RACISM TO RACIAL JUSTICE

Tools, Analysis, and Action for Youth Workers

NYCI National Youth Council of Ireland

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National Youth Council of Ireland

The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) is the representative body for national voluntary youth work organisations in Ireland.

It represents and supports the interests of voluntary youth organisations and uses its collective experience to act on issues that impact on young people.

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Equality and Intercultural Programme

The Equality and Intercultural Programme supports the youth work sector to embed equality, inclusion, diversity and interculturalism in your youth work setting through its unique and innovative suite of training programmes, resources, policy development, advice, research and networking opportunities. Central to our work is hearing the voice of minority and marginalised young people and youth workers.

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Disclaimer on terminology

Throughout this resource, we use terms and concepts that are not neutral. This is a deliberate choice. The language we use is shaped by youth work values, a social justice lens, and NYCI's commitment to Racial Justice and anti-racist practice.

There are many definitions of terms related to racism, identity, and oppression, each shaped by particular contexts, worldviews, and political positions. Rather than aiming for an illusion of neutrality or objectivity, we have chosen to use terminology that centres racialised young people and supports youth workers to reflect, respond, and act in meaningful ways.

We use the term racialised to describe young people, workers, and communities affected by racism. We recognise that not all minority ethnic people or people of colour agree on or use this term. We also name whiteness, particularly as it shows up in white settled people, as part of how racism operates and is maintained.

When we use the word '*race*', we are referring to the socially constructed idea of there being different "races," an idea created and used to control, rank, and oppress people. We do not use this term to describe people's ethnicity, identity, or diversity. Throughout this resource, the word 'race' is used only to name the false categorisation that is at the core of racism, and which has been used to justify the dehumanisation of entire groups of people.

A core principle in this work is that impact matters more than intention. Harm does not disappear because it was unintentional. Focusing only on intention centres the person who caused harm rather than the person who experienced it. In youth work practice, shifting our focus to the racial harm that is experienced by our young people, colleagues and community members, requires prioritising listening, accountability, and repair work.

We invite you to approach the terminology used in this resource not as fixed or exhaustive, but as a starting point for developing a shared language that supports inclusive, critically aware, and racially just youth work. Engage with these terms not only intellectually, but as practical tools to guide and strengthen your everyday practice.

Using this resource

This resource was developed alongside two other resources; an e-learning on “Understanding Racism for Youth Workers” and a “Responding to Racism” resource designed as a short ‘How To’ guidelines document. Each resource builds on the other and we strongly recommend that you do the e-learning course first. It is designed to clarify and explain racism from a youth work perspective and with a focus on the impact of racism on young people.

[Understanding Racism for Youth Workers - NYCI E-Learning]

Contents

1

Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the resource

This resource has been developed to embed and build on the practice introduced on NYCI's Racial Justice training, the first training programme of its kind in Ireland.

The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), in recognising the growing challenge of racism in our communities, developed its pioneering Racial Justice training to support youth workers in this important work. This resource is not just about theory; it is designed to be interactive and hands-on. It was designed to deepen our understanding of racism and to connect further with the tools and resources we use in our training.

Ultimately, this resource is about making Racial Justice a real, actionable commitment in our daily lives and in the vital work we do with young people. This resource supports that commitment, offering key ideas and tools to bring our practice.

1.2 Importance of Racial Justice in Youth Work

In a world where racial injustice and inequality are very present, youth work has a central role to play. Youth work that is guided by social justice principles and that uses a critical social education model supports systemic change to ensure the best outcomes for all young people. It champions the rights and safety of all young people, including those from minority ethnic identities.

With the training and this resource, we offer the youth work sector the additional tools it needs to combat racial injustice. When combined with

the sharp and reflective skills of youth workers, these tools are designed to encourage meaningful change. Our goal is a more racially just world where every young person feels a sense of belonging, equity, and agency.

1.3 NYCI's Commitment

The National Youth Council of Ireland's (NYCI) Equality and Intercultural Programme has been working for several years to develop our understanding of Racial Justice and deepen our practice. We are eager to share what we've learned and invite you to join us on this important journey.

NYCI's journey to understanding

Our journey began like many others in the youth sector: as an organisation, NYCI recognised Ireland's growing diversity and aimed to meet the needs of minority ethnic young people through a youth work response. In 2008, NYCI established the Intercultural Programme with a vision to support and upskill the youth sector in inclusive and anti-racist practice. However, in those early days, our focus was on supporting inclusive practice, with less emphasis on anti-racism.

That began to change significantly as we listened more closely to minority ethnic young people. At first tentatively, then more forcefully, minority ethnic young people began to speak about the widespread racism they experienced. This became very real in 2015 when we conducted focus groups for our 'Make Minority a Priority' research report. As we continued listening to young people over the following years, we realised the situation was getting worse.

Meanwhile, youth workers often asked us, "How do we tackle racism in our youth spaces?" What we heard was - "tell us what to say to change racist behaviours, or give us activities to do, that will shift young people's attitudes". It became clear that existing resources – even excellent anti-racism toolkits – weren't working for them. Why?

We discovered that these anti-racism toolkits were all missing several crucial elements. They failed to show that:

- Racism is systemic: it's built into our systems and institutions.
- Racism is one of several systems of oppression: It's interconnected with other forms of injustice.
- Racism is partly a response to difference: i.e. It usually targets those perceived as "different."
- It can be hard to see beyond our own experiences: Our own, and our young people's experience with oppression or disadvantage can make it difficult to see oppression in others' lives.
- Racism is not just ignorance: It's not simply a lack of understanding that can be 'fixed' by education.

What we learned

In developing an effective response to racism for youth workers, several core insights became clear.

Training alone won't fix racism: We cannot educate our way out of racism without incorporating a deeper analysis. Racism is systemic, historically produced, and sustained because it benefits those with the most power and privilege. Without understanding how racism operates within institutions, policies, and everyday norms, training and awareness programmes without this analysis remain limited and are easily undone.

Racism is held in stories and assumptions: We cannot address racism without recognising the strength and reach of the narratives that uphold it. These narratives operate at multiple levels: within us, within youth spaces, across communities, and throughout organisations and systems. Challenging racism therefore involves actively identifying, disrupting, and rewriting these narratives. This ongoing work of narrative change is a core part of Racial Justice in practice.

Small harms add up: Recognising racism requires attention to both everyday harm and institutional failure. This includes understanding microaggressions and acknowledging how inadequate or dismissive organisational responses can be. When institutions fail to respond properly,

they reinforce exclusion and signal that racialised experiences are not taken seriously.

Mixing people isn't the same as sharing power: Creating diverse spaces is not the same as creating just or inclusive ones. Simply bringing people together does not break down inequality. Trust does not emerge without intention, and inclusion does not happen without shared power. A critical question that guides all our work is: *on whose terms is this happening?*

Safer spaces don't end at the door: Codes of behaviour and safer space policies can support youth work environments, but they do not protect young people beyond the doors. Many minority ethnic young people experience racism on their way to and from youth spaces, in schools, on public transport, or online. These realities shape who feels able to attend, participate, and belong, and must be accounted for in practice.

Policies only matter if practice changes: Anti-racism policies only matter if they change how work is done. Written commitments without practical follow-through risk becoming symbolic or performative rather than protective. For policy to be meaningful, it must be reflected in decision-making, responses to harm, and everyday organisational behaviour.

Equity means responding to different needs: A needs-based approach allows youth workers to move from equality towards equity. Rather than treating everyone the same, it responds to different levels of harm, access, and exclusion. This shift is essential for moving towards social justice and sustaining meaningful change.

How we listen matters: Finally, understanding racism within the wider context of intersecting systems of oppression matters. People's experiences of classism, disablism, sexism, homophobia or other forms of marginalisation shape how they hear and respond to anti-racist work. Empathic listening and compassionate dialogue are central to building trust, credibility, and real engagement.

Building on these understandings, NYCI started this work from a social justice perspective and from there we shifted our focus toward Racial Justice, aiming for real and lasting societal change. It was important to explicitly name our new approach and also align it with a growing

international understanding on what is needed to make a genuine difference. A core part of this approach is ensuring that minority ethnic people are front and central, and that we are actively creating opportunities to amplify voices that need to be heard.

This vital work, referred to as 'we' throughout, was made possible by the thought leadership of Amel Yacef, who also spearheaded our training development. Amel has collaborated with the Programme since its beginning. Co-authors of this resource include members of our external trainers Mdahyelya Bassi and Bronwyn April, and Programme team member, Cristina Iancu.

We are deeply conscious that our team both in the Equality and Intercultural Programme, and NYCI more widely, while being ethnically diverse is predominantly white and settled. In adopting all the learning of this resource, our Programme team take it on ourselves to be accountable, to stand up and be counted, to embrace discomfort, to learn from our failings and to never give up.

To lead by example, we ensure that our Racial Justice training, and development of resources on understanding and addressing racism, are led by individuals from racialised backgrounds. This ensures that the expertise and lived experiences of minority ethnic communities directly shape both the delivery and content of our training and resources.

1.4 Laying the foundation for the journey

NYCI's inclusive and responsive practice grew from a shared question asked by youth workers and young people alike: how do we create spaces and relationships that respond to the realities of young people pushed to the margins, rather than reacting to behaviour, crisis, or harm as it appears in the moment?

This approach asks us to slow down and pay attention. To notice what is being communicated beneath behaviour, to remain open to what we do not yet understand, and to resist the urge to default to control, fixing or certainty. Inclusive practice recognises that we will never fully know young

people's experiences, identities, or histories — and it makes space for that not-knowing, rather than seeing it as a failure.

In the context of Racial Justice, being responsive means understanding that racism shapes how young people move through the world, how they are perceived, and how safe they feel. It means responding to harm in ways that protect those affected, while also engaging with those who caused harm with clarity, accountability, and care. It requires consistency — showing up for young people, their families, and their communities, especially when things are complex, uncomfortable, or challenging.

At its core, inclusive and responsive practice is grounded in the values of youth work: keeping young people safe from harm, supporting their dignity and belonging, and creating the conditions for them to learn, grow, and reach their full potential. It is about showing up steadily, reliably, while holding firm boundaries rooted in justice. This is not a soft option; it is a deliberate, values-led way of practicing Racial Justice.

This approach is grounded in three connected elements that guide responsive and inclusive youth work: how we understand context, reflect on our role, and act for change. Together, these elements set out what is essential for creating inclusive youth spaces.

Look Out – Understand the context

Racism, inequality, and power shape young people's lives in real and material ways. Looking out means moving beyond individual behaviour to see the wider systems, histories, and conditions young people are navigating, and how these influence harm, exclusion, and opportunity.

Look In – Practice self-reflection

We all carry bias, assumptions, and different forms of power. Practicing self-reflection helps us notice how these show up in our work, supports us to face discomfort with honesty, and ensures we are grounded, accountable, and intentional when we show up for young people.

Foster Change – Embed justice in practice

Working towards justice for young people is a core value of youth work. Fostering change means consistently embedding this commitment in our everyday practice — through relationships, ongoing engagement with

those harmed and those who may cause harm, and by creating spaces where young people are supported to thrive and reach their full potential.

Key takeaways

- Racial Justice is not an add-on to youth work; it is central to inclusive and rights-based practice.
- Youth work operates within systems shaped by history, power and policy.
- Commitment to Racial Justice requires intention, reflection and sustained action.
- This resource invites youth workers into a learning journey rather than offering fixed answers.

Reflective questions

- What brings me to this work on Racial Justice at this moment in my practice?
- How do my values as a youth worker align with NYCI's commitment to Racial Justice?
- Where do I feel confident in this work, and where do I feel uncertain or resistant?
- What does it mean for me to approach this resource as a journey rather than having a checklist?

2

Understanding Racism

2.1 Definitions: NYCI's understanding of racism

To effectively tackle racism, it is essential to have a shared understanding of what it is. At NYCI, racism is understood as structural, institutional, and historical, not just as individual prejudice or isolated behaviour. It is a system of power that is embedded in society and reproduced through institutions, policies, cultural norms, and everyday practices.

Racism excludes, disadvantages, or harms individuals and communities based on their actual or perceived race, ethnicity, nationality, or cultural background —particularly where that background belongs to a group that has been historically marginalised or subordinated, including the Traveller community. Racism exists whether harm is intentional or not.

NYCI supports the definition of racism developed by the Irish Network Against Racism (INAR), grounded in the lived experiences of minority ethnic people:

Racism is any action, practice, law, speech, or incident which has the effect (whether intentional or not) of undermining a person's enjoyment of their human rights, based on their actual or perceived ethnic or national origin or background, where that background is that of a marginalised or historically subordinated group.

Racism can be expressed through actions and behaviours, rules and policies, institutional systems, and cultural ideas such as stereotypes. At its root, racism is shaped by imperialist and colonial ideologies that positioned some groups as superior and justified dehumanising, exclusion, control, and violence.

Understanding racism in this way moves the focus beyond intent and attitudes, helping us recognise how unequal outcomes and harms are produced and sustained within society.

2.2 Historical and contemporary responses to racism

Racial injustice is deeply rooted in history. The ideologies that constructed 'race' and racial superiority emerged during global exploration and colonialism, while anti-racist movements similarly are products of their historical contexts.

Practitioners, civil rights activists and thought leaders have travelled a journey to reach this current juncture of adopting and promoting a Racial Justice approach. In asking others to come with us on a Racial Justice journey we feel it is important to name some of the milestones on the way so that you can better situate yourself in your own journey of understanding.

A global history of racial ideology

Modern racism is deeply rooted in European colonial expansion from the 15th century onward. As European powers began to explore, conquer, and exploit lands in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, they constructed racial categories to justify their domination. 'race' became a tool to legitimise enslavement, land theft, and genocide.

The *Transatlantic Slave Trade* (1500s–1800s) saw African people dehumanised and reduced to commodities. The ideology that Africans were inferior and subhuman laid the groundwork for systemic anti-Black racism. Later, "scientific racism" emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries. European Enlightenment thinkers and scientists categorised humans by 'race' , asserting that white Europeans were intellectually and morally superior to others. These false ideas provided "scientific" backing for colonial policies and racial segregation.

Closely connected to this was *eugenics*. While scientific racism functioned as the ideological justification, eugenics became the practical application — using policy, medicine and law to enforce racial hierarchies and control populations. For example, it imposed forced sterilisation. Disabled people, Roma and Indigenous communities, people of colour and other marginalised groups were targeted. The legacy of scientific racism and eugenics continues to shape systems and institutions today, even where the language of 'race' and biology is no longer used explicitly.

The institutionalisation of white supremacy

White supremacy, the belief that white people are superior to all other 'races' and should dominate, was a central part of colonialism. British, French and Dutch colonial laws placed white settlers and officials above Indigenous populations in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. This process is known as settler colonialism, where white settlers displaced Indigenous peoples and established racial hierarchies that persist today in countries like the United States, Canada, Australia, and South Africa.

In the U.S. context, the genocide of Indigenous people and slavery were grounded in white supremacist logic. This was followed by the Jim Crow era (19th century into the mid-20th century), where laws mandated racial separation and segregation in all aspects of life. The legacy of these policies continues in modern policing, incarceration, and economic inequality.

In the U.K. white supremacy was central to British imperial expansion. In the 19th century, Darwin's theories were distorted into Social Darwinism, promoting the notion that white Europeans were the fittest and most evolved. The concept of "The White Man's Burden," popularised by Rudyard Kipling, framed empire as a moral obligation for whites to "civilise" non-white peoples, portraying colonialism as benevolent. As a result, many former colonies still grapple with economic and racial inequality rooted in colonial systems, which also influences British social attitudes today (e.g., the Windrush scandal).

Racism in an Irish context

Ireland's relationship to racism is shaped by its own history of colonisation, migration, and changing global position. For centuries, Ireland was colonised by Britain, and Irish people were subjected to political domination, land dispossession, economic exploitation, and cultural suppression. In British colonial discourse, the Irish were often portrayed as backward, uncivilised, or inferior. These portrayals drew on racialised thinking that was also used to justify the colonisation of African, Indigenous, and other non-European peoples.

At the same time, the Irish experience was not the same as that of people who were enslaved, racialised, or colonised on the basis of skin colour. Irish people were positioned ambiguously within racial hierarchies: while generally categorised as white, they were nevertheless not always treated as fully belonging within dominant ideas of whiteness, particularly in Britain and the United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Over time, many Irish migrants in Britain and the US gained greater access to rights, safety, and opportunity. This often involved becoming accepted as white within dominant racial systems, sometimes by distancing themselves from Black communities and other racialised groups, and by aligning with prevailing racial norms. In parallel, Irish people also participated in the British imperial system in different ways, including through military, administrative, and labour roles. These realities sit alongside Ireland's history of colonisation.

Within Ireland itself, anti-colonial struggle was frequently connected to wider global movements against imperialism. This contributed to a strong tradition of international solidarity with oppressed peoples. However, solidarity as a political value has not always translated into anti-racist practice at home.

As Ireland's economic and international standing changed, particularly from the late 20th century onwards, the country increasingly came to be seen as a place of opportunity. Since the late 1990s, Ireland has experienced significant immigration, bringing greater cultural and racial

diversity. This shift has also exposed and intensified forms of racism that were previously denied, ignored, or framed as “not an Irish issue”.

Racism in Ireland today operates at individual, institutional, structural and historical levels. The Direct Provision system, created to accommodate people seeking asylum, is widely recognised as an example of institutional racism, due to its long-term containment of people in poor living conditions with restricted rights. Ireland has also seen growing levels of racist harassment, hate crime, racial profiling, and anti-migrant narratives, particularly during periods of social and economic strain.

At the same time, racism in Ireland did not begin with recent migration. The Traveller community, Ireland’s indigenous ethnic minority, has faced long-standing and systemic racism across housing, education, health, employment, and public life. Anti-Traveller racism is a central part of Ireland’s racial history and remains deeply embedded in institutions, policy decisions, and everyday attitudes.

Understanding racism in an Irish context requires holding multiple truths at once: Ireland’s history of colonisation and exclusion, its partial and conditional inclusion within global systems of whiteness, and its current role as a society in which racism is produced, reproduced, and challenged. This complexity matters for youth work, because racism in Ireland is not only something inherited from elsewhere—it is something that shows up in our systems, our communities, and our everyday practices.

From Assimilation to Interculturalism: A journey in policy

Our modern journey in responding to cultural diversity begins in the 1960s, a period shaped by civil rights struggles, anti-colonial movements, labour organising, and demands for social and economic justice. Across many countries, human rights movements were naming racism more openly and challenging the impact of structural and institutional oppression. It became increasingly clear that national policies, welfare systems, education, housing, and labour markets were built on deeply embedded historical ideas of racial hierarchy and exclusion.

At the same time, many European countries were actively recruiting workers from former colonies to meet labour shortages and support economic growth. Migration during this period was not accidental: it was closely tied to class, cheap labour, and the rebuilding of economies after war and dissolving of empires. As global migration increased in the decades following colonialism, governments introduced policies to manage growing cultural diversity — often without fully addressing the racialised and economic conditions that had produced that diversity in the first place.

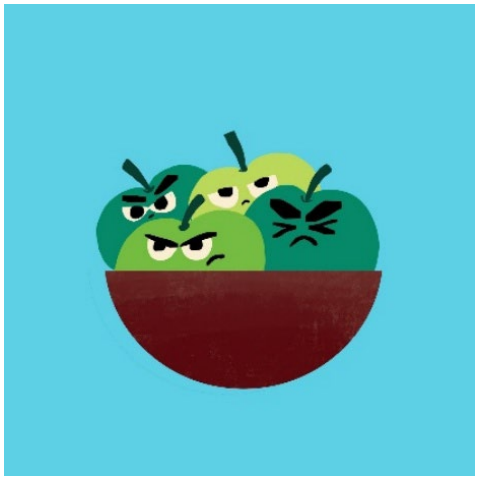
Since the mid-1900s, different approaches to managing cultural diversity have been developed and supported through national policy. Early approaches were largely designed to *manage* minority populations rather than share power or address inequality. Over time, and under pressure from trade unions, left-leaning political movements expanded access to education, and together with human rights campaigns policies began to shift towards ideas of social cohesion, participation, and belonging.

However, while the language evolved, racism itself was often not centred. Many policies focused on encouraging individuals and communities to "get along", adapt, or integrate, rather than confronting how racism was embedded in institutions, labour markets, housing, policing, and public attitudes. Responsibility was frequently placed on individuals and communities to create harmony, rather than on the State to address structural injustice.

An analogy can help illustrate this journey. Imagine different cultural groups as various types of fruit in a bowl, representing a country's cultural diversity. Different policy models describe how these groups were expected to coexist.

The Assimilation model

The first dominant policy approach in Ireland was the Assimilation Model, often summed up by the phrase, *"When in Rome, do as the Romans do."* This model assumed there was one correct national identity, shaped by those with the most social, economic, and political power. Everyone else was expected to conform to this norm to belong. This approach strongly influenced Irish policy from the mid-1900s through to the early 2000s.



In Ireland, assimilationist thinking is most clearly visible in policies affecting the Traveller community. Laws and policies aimed at ending nomadism ignored Traveller culture, history, and identity. They were rooted in the belief that if Travellers abandoned their way of life, they would blend – and be absorbed - into wider Irish society. But just as we cannot turn oranges into apples, cultural identity cannot be erased through policy or force. The long-term harm caused by these policies shows how deeply flawed this approach was.

Despite its failures, assimilationist thinking persisted in Ireland until relatively recently, and its assumptions still shape public attitudes and institutional practices today. Similar approaches were used in other countries, including France, where assimilation was central to colonial and post-colonial policy. In the French context, assimilation meant imposing language, culture, and values as a condition of belonging, while denying space for cultural difference or political challenge.

The Multicultural model

By contrast, the UK largely adopted a Multicultural model as cultural diversity increased after the colonial period. This approach, often described as *"live and let live,"* supported the recognition of different cultural identities and allowed space for single-identity communities to

exist. The intention was respect and tolerance, based on the idea that all cultures were equally valid.

However, multiculturalism often failed to address underlying racial and economic inequalities. While communities were permitted to exist side by side, there was little emphasis on meaningful interaction, shared power, or structural change. As a result, cultural and ethnic groups often remained separated, with racism and inequality left unresolved. In some cases, this separation was later blamed for social tensions and unrest, including the 'race' riots experienced in parts of the UK.

In our fruit analogy, multiculturalism looks like a bowl where the fruit remains untouched—separate, distinct, and divided. Differences are acknowledged, but the barriers created by racism, class inequality, and exclusion are not dismantled.

In contexts where policies are weak, unclear, or poorly implemented, communities often organise themselves in similarly siloed ways. People naturally gravitate towards those who share their experiences, particularly when racism and exclusion go unaddressed. It is no coincidence that "multiculturalism" remains the most commonly used term to describe diversity.

The Melting Pot model

The Melting Pot model is often associated with countries like the United States, shaped by large-scale migration and settlement. In this model, cultural identities are expected to blend into a new, shared national culture. In our fruit analogy, this resembles a smoothie.

While this model suggests unity, it often masks unequal power. Certain cultures—usually white, dominant ones—tend to set the tone, while others are expected to dilute or soften their identity to fit in. Even in societies described as melting pots, people frequently hold on tightly to specific cultural heritages, particularly in response to racism or exclusion. Over generations, identities become layered and complex, shaped by multiple cultural influences rather than fully blended or erased.

The Intercultural model

By the early 2000s, it was increasingly recognised that existing models were not working. Think tanks and policy groups, particularly in the UK and Canada, began to develop alternative approaches. Many of these were led by people from minority ethnic communities, responding to growing racism, exclusion, and the fragility of social cohesion.

The Intercultural model emerged as an attempt to move beyond coexistence towards meaningful engagement. First adopted in Canada and later in parts of Europe and South America, interculturalism was eventually embraced at EU policy level. It prioritises cross-cultural dialogue, shared spaces, and collaboration, while also recognising the need to challenge unequal power relations between majority and minority groups.

Interculturalism places greater emphasis on participation, fairness, and equity, rather than simply tolerance. It was within this broader shift that the Irish state formally recognised Travellers as an ethnic minority. However, while interculturalism speaks about sharing power, it has not always gone far enough in naming racism explicitly or addressing economic and institutional inequality.

Using our analogy, interculturalism is like turning the fruit bowl into a fruit salad. Each fruit retains its own flavour, but together they create something

shared. Ideally, no single fruit dominates, and the mix depends on fairness, balance, and intention.

The Irish context: The journey continues

In the early 2000s, Ireland formally adopted interculturalism in line with EU policy. Funding patterns reflected this shift, with grants favouring mixed-identity spaces and cross-cultural initiatives. However, over time, the language used within policy documents and used by policy makers has shifted to "integration".

For many minority ethnic communities, this shift raises concerns. While integration is often presented as neutral or practical, it can place responsibility back on individuals and communities to adapt, without addressing racism, class inequality, or institutional power. Ongoing racial profiling, barriers in housing and employment, unequal access to services, and underrepresentation in power sharing show that the promises of interculturalism remain largely unmet.

As a result, some communities—particularly Travellers—question whether integration is simply assimilation under a new name. At the same time, many activists and thinkers argue that aspects of multiculturalism remain vital. Shared minority-led spaces allow people to build confidence, leadership, and political voice in contexts where racism is still a daily reality. From these foundations, the deeper goals of interculturalism—shared power, co-design, and fairness—are more likely to be realised.

Key to all this discussion is that without centring racism and inequality, all these policies remain focused on attaining social harmony rather than justice.

The birth of anti-racist movements

Racism did not emerge accidentally, nor was it simply a by-product of cultural misunderstanding. It developed alongside European colonial expansion, slavery, land dispossession, and the extraction of labour and resources. From the outset, racial ideas were used to justify exploitation,

hierarchy, and unequal access to power. Resistance to racism therefore emerged at the same time as racism itself — through slave revolts, anti-colonial struggle, labour organising, and demands for political self-determination.

In the 20th century, the scale of racial violence under fascism and Nazism brought racial ideology into sharper global focus. In the aftermath of the Second World War, racism was increasingly named as a root cause of genocide and mass atrocities. This led to the development of an international human rights framework, which formally rejected racial hierarchy and discrimination as legitimate foundations for state policy. Through instruments such as the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, adopted under the United Nations, states were placed under a legal obligation not only to prohibit discrimination, but to take proactive measures to prevent and dismantle it.

However, while human rights law provided an important foundation, it did not in itself dismantle racism. Anti-racism as a political and social movement was shaped more directly by Black liberation movements, anti-colonial struggles, civil rights organising, and working-class mobilisation. These movements highlighted that racism was not just about prejudice or ignorance, but about how power, labour, housing, policing, education, and borders were organised.

In Ireland, formal anti-racism policy arrived relatively late. The first National Action Plan Against Racism (NAPAR) was introduced in 2004, during a period when assimilationist thinking still strongly shaped institutions and public attitudes. While NAPAR acknowledged racism as a problem, much of the response focused on awareness-raising, training, and intercultural dialogue. These initiatives were not without value, but they often failed to address systemic issues such as racial profiling, unequal access to housing and employment, immigration controls, or the ongoing marginalisation of Travellers.

At European level, symbolic initiatives such as the 2008 International Year of Intercultural Dialogue reflected growing concern about social cohesion but again stopped short of naming racism as a structural problem

requiring redistribution of power and resources. Across many contexts, responsibility for “integration” and “harmony” was placed on individuals and communities experiencing racism, rather than on the systems producing inequality.

In response, thinkers and organisers from racialised and minority ethnic communities increasingly argued that anti-racism could not be reduced to education or attitude change alone. They highlighted that approaches which failed to challenge institutional power, economic inequality, and state violence would not meaningfully improve people’s lives. This critique helped give rise to a clearer distinction between anti-racism and Racial Justice.

Racial Justice frameworks build on anti-racist struggle but go further. They centre accountability, material change, and the redistribution of power, recognising that equality cannot be achieved without addressing the conditions that produce racial harm in the first place.

Anti-racism movements have always overlapped with anti-colonialism and continue to do so today. Contemporary examples include:

- **Black Lives Matter** (2013–present), which links police violence and mass incarceration to histories of slavery, colonialism, and racial capitalism.
- Indigenous movements such as **Idle No More** and **Land Back**, which challenge ongoing colonial control of land, governance, and resources.
- Transnational anti-racist networks addressing border regimes, deportation systems, and exploitative labour practices shaped by global inequality.
- In Ireland, mobilisation against Direct Provision and deportation, including campaigns such as **End Direct Provision**, which expose how immigration systems reproduce racial and class-based harm.

Across the different contexts, anti-racism is grounded in the principle of self-determination — the right of communities experiencing racism to define their own needs, priorities, and futures. It is also shaped by an understanding of intersectionality, recognising that racism interacts with

class, gender, disability, sexuality, and migration status to produce uneven and compounded forms of harm.

Crucially, anti-racism depends on solidarity. It requires collective action across communities and borders to challenge shared systems of oppression, rather than framing racism as an individual or cultural problem to be managed.

2.3 What is Racial Justice?

At NYCI, our understanding of Racial Justice is shaped by the experiences and insights of minority ethnic young people and their communities. These experiences point clearly to the need for a proactive, justice-focused approach grounded in equity rather than on reaction-based interventions.

Our working definition of Racial Justice is closely linked to our understanding of racism. It is adapted from the work of **Race Forward**, an organisation advancing Racial Justice since the 1980s:

> Racial Justice is the systemic fair treatment of racialised groups. It is not only the absence of discrimination, but the presence of deliberate policies, practices, and systems that prevent harm and sustain equity over time.

Racial Justice focuses on creating equitable access to rights, opportunities, power, and outcomes. It moves beyond responding to individual incidents of racism and instead addresses the structural and institutional conditions that produce inequality, many of which are normalised or invisible within everyday systems.

While anti-racism is concerned with identifying and dismantling racism, Racial Justice is about actively building the conditions that make equity real. This requires intentional action, shared responsibility, and accountability, rather than reliance on goodwill or awareness alone.

At its core, Racial Justice is about fairness (equity), inclusion, and belonging. It involves building trust, sharing power, and centring minority ethnic people and their communities in decision-making. It also requires

moving away from deficit-based thinking (i.e. thinking there is not enough resources for everyone) and towards collective approaches that recognise how shared action can expand opportunities for all.

Anti-Racism and Racial Justice: What's the difference?

Although often used interchangeably, anti-racism and Racial Justice describe related but distinct approaches. For youth workers, understanding the difference matters because it shapes both how we respond to harm and how we work towards lasting change.

Anti-Racism

Anti-racism focuses on identifying, challenging, and interrupting racism in its interpersonal, institutional, structural, and historical forms. It is primarily corrective and includes actions such as:

- Challenging racist language, behaviour, and assumptions
- Recognising and unlearning privileges linked to whiteness
- Addressing bias and discrimination within systems such as education, policing, or housing
- Responding to the harm caused by racism in youth work settings

Anti-racism equips youth workers to act when racism occurs and to refuse silence in the face of injustice.

Racial Justice

Racial Justice builds on anti-racism by focusing on transformation rather than response alone. It asks what needs to be created to prevent harm and sustain equity. This includes:

- Redistributing power and resources to communities that have been historically excluded
- Centring the leadership and lived experience of racialised people, particularly young people
- Addressing how racism intersects with class, gender, disability, and other forms of oppression

- Reimagining policies, programmes, and services so that equity and belonging are built in from the outset

While anti-racism functions as a framework that protects both racialised young people, staff and organisations — focused on safeguarding, setting standards, and intervening when harm occurs — Racial Justice aims to change the conditions that allow harm to occur in the first place. It is a long-term commitment to structural change and a practical framework for building fairer systems in everyday practice.

Key takeaways

- Racism is a system that operates at individual, institutional and structural levels.
- Racism is both historical and contemporary, shaped by Ireland's specific context.
- Sharing our definitions and analysis is important so we can recognise harm, analyse the context of that harm, and respond to it.
- Racial Justice moves beyond naming racism; it addresses root causes and impacts and looks at what justice and equity mean.

Reflective questions

- How do I currently define racism, and how has that understanding evolved over time?
- What do I know about the history and present-day impact of racism in my community and in Ireland?
- Where do I tend to locate racism: in individuals, systems, or both?
- How comfortable am I naming racism directly in my youth work practice?

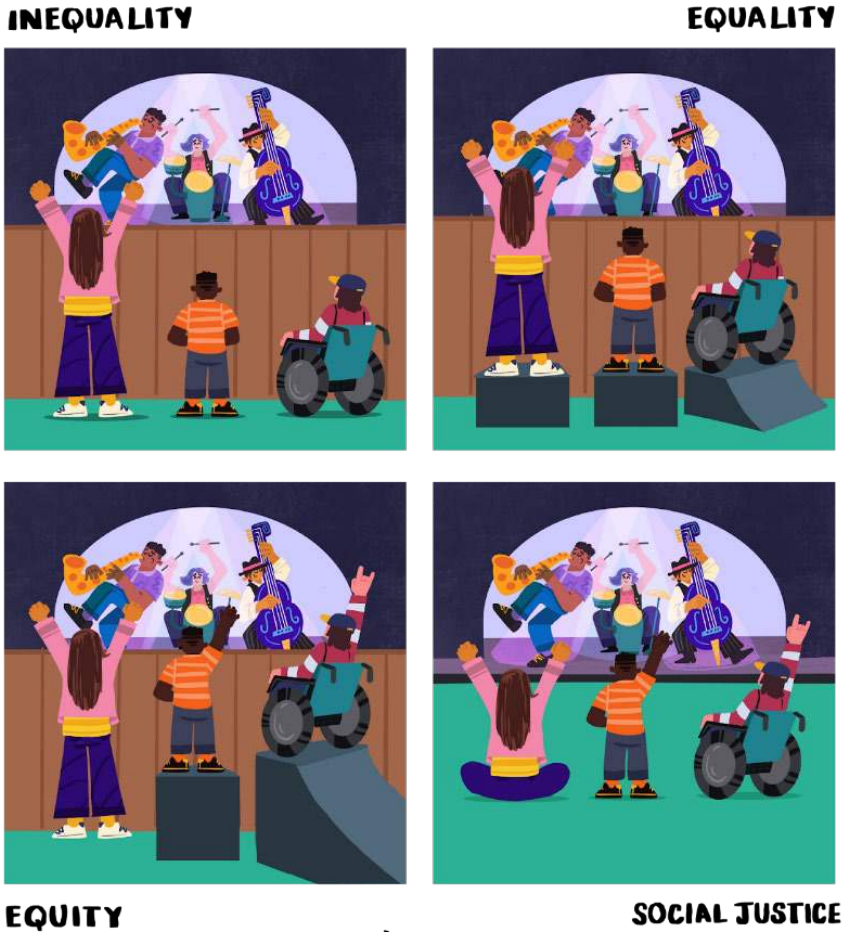
3

Understanding Racist Oppression and Injustice

The following frameworks and models are designed to deepen our understanding of Racial Justice.

3.1 No Social Justice without Racial Justice

A core value of youth work in Ireland is social justice and critical awareness. The illustration below explains the relationship between the concepts of injustice, equality, equity, and social justice. It helps clarify the route to our ultimate goal: i.e. challenging inequalities and injustice, establishing an equity approach and working toward the realisation of social justice for all young people.



Understanding these key concepts through a Racial Justice lens

When viewed from the perspective of Racial Justice, this model helps us explore the ways in which racism intersects with these concepts, making it easier to see how racism exists within wider systems, and giving greater clarity on the impact of racism on the young people and communities we work with. In doing so it offers us practical ways to work toward achieving Racial Justice.

Before diving into the connection between Racial and Social Justice, we want to share what the word JUSTICE means to us in this context: Justice means acknowledging the historical and current injustices that shape people's lives and taking action to repair harm, redistribute resources, and create systems that are fair, inclusive, and accountable. In youth work, justice means creating spaces where all young people are seen, heard, and valued and where structures of power are actively challenged. Justice asks us to confront the systems that cause harm, and to reimagine new ways of living, working, and relating that are rooted in equity and care.

Inequality/ injustice occurs when people are denied fair treatment or dignity due to systems that privilege some and exclude others. This includes the ongoing marginalisation of racialised communities, limited access to quality education and the patterns of over-policing or harmful stereotyping built into everyday life.

- Example: A school curriculum that centres White European history while ignoring African or Traveller histories.

Equality means treating everyone the same. While this sounds fair, it assumes we all start from the same place, which isn't true in a society shaped by racism. A purely equal approach can actually maintain inequality by ignoring people's lived realities.

- Example: Giving all young people the same information sheet about your service without recognising that English might not be a first

language or that the information will be misunderstood by parents who have just arrived in the area.

Equity recognises that people face different barriers and provides the support they need to succeed. Through a Racial Justice lens, this means redistributing access, power, and opportunity to those who have been historically excluded or harmed.

- Example: Offering culturally relevant mental health supports, interpretation services, or outreach tailored to marginalised ethnic groups.

Social Justice means working to change systems so that everyone can have dignity, fairness, and equal chances in life. **Racial Justice** makes this stronger by focusing on how racism causes harm, amplifying the voices and leadership of racialised communities, and showing the need for real change in the system.

- Example: Youth services advocating to reform funding models that consistently under-resource organisations led by racialised communities.

As youth workers, you are not only supporting individuals, you also engage with the systems around them. Understanding the difference between equality and equity, and recognising how injustice operates, allows us to create truly inclusive and responsive youth work environments.

Racial Justice *Is* Social Justice

You can't achieve social justice without Racial Justice. Social Justice means building a fair society where everyone has access to rights and protections. Racial Justice is a core part of this work. It means naming racism, addressing how 'race' and racism shape people's experiences, and dismantling the systems that allow it to persist.

In youth work, this means creating environments where every young person feels safe and respected, where power is shared, and where inequalities are named and challenged. Racial Justice asks us to look specifically at how racism operates, to go beyond abstract ideas of fairness, and to act deliberately to address its impacts. This work demands equity, not just equality. Only by embedding Racial Justice in our values and practices can we build a truly socially just future for all young people.

Racial Justice means understanding how 'race' and racism shape people's experiences — from everyday microaggressions to long-standing institutional inequality - and actively challenging racism.

In youth work, social justice means creating environments where:

- Every young person feels safe, respected, and included
- Power is shared, and young people are supported to lead
- Inequalities based on race, class, gender, ability, and identity are named and challenged

As youth workers, committing to social justice means committing to Racial Justice. It involves:

- Listening deeply to the experiences of racialised young people
- Naming racism and taking action when it occurs
- Challenging the conditions that produce harm and exclusion
- Understanding how racism intersects with poverty, xenophobia, disablism, gender inequality, and more

Racial Justice is central to youth work, only by embedding Racial Justice in our values, practices, and systems can we build a truly socially-just future for all young people.

3.2 The Quadrant of Racial Oppression

Racism is often talked about as individual behaviour or isolated incidents. This makes it harder to see how racism is produced and sustained through systems, structures, and everyday practices. Without a clearer framework, responses tend to focus on intent, attitude, or conflict, rather than impact and power.

The **Quadrant of Oppression** is a tool that helps youth workers move beyond surface-level explanations for experiences of racism. It supports a fuller analysis of how racism and other forms of oppression operate at different levels at the same time — from individual actions and relationships, to organisational practices, to wider social and structural conditions.

The Quadrant of Oppression can be used to look at all systems of oppression, however here we focus on using it to look at **racism as a system of oppression**. The Quadrant shows how racism operates simultaneously at different levels — personal, institutional, structural, and historical — reinforcing harm over time. The quadrant helps move our analysis beyond individual behaviour and towards understanding how power, policy, and history shape everyday experiences of racialised young people.

Racism as a System of Oppression: Using the Quadrant in practice

1. Individual Racism

At the individual level, racism appears in attitudes, language, and behaviours. This includes racial slurs, stereotyping, exclusion, and microaggressions. These acts are often dismissed as minor or unintentional, but their impact accumulates over time.

Individual racism can also be internalised. Young people may absorb negative messages about their own identity, leading them to feel less worthy, hide parts of themselves, or believe they do not fully belong.

Seeing it in practice:

- A young person is followed by security staff in a shop without cause.
- A student is repeatedly told they "speak very well", implying low expectations.
- A young person downplays their culture to avoid standing out.

Youth work focus:

- Support young people to name harm without minimising it.
- Work with young people to recognise internalised racism by affirming identity and belonging.

2. Cultural and Structural Racism

Structural racism refers to the broader social, economic, and cultural forces that shape how institutions function and how people are treated. It is created through the combined effect of media narratives, policy choices, economic inequality, and political power over time.

At this level, racism becomes normalised and often goes unquestioned.

Seeing it in practice:

- Persistent negative media portrayals of certain communities.
- Lack of racial diversity in leadership and decision-making roles.
- Disproportionate surveillance or policing of specific groups.

Youth work focus:

- Help young people question dominant narratives,
- Support them to shift blame away from individuals and recognise inequality as a systemic issue rather than a personal failure.

3. Institutional Racism

Institutional racism occurs when institutions — schools, youth services, health systems, funders, or state agencies — operate in ways that disadvantage racialised groups. This often happens through policies, procedures, or eligibility criteria that appear neutral but reflect majority norms and priorities.

Institutional racism is frequently maintained through a lack of safeguards, accountability, or culturally responsive practice.

Seeing it in practice:

- Schools or services requiring documentation or language fluency that some families cannot easily provide.
- Funding criteria that exclude newer migrant-led groups due to rigid governance requirements.
- Delays in recognising overseas qualifications that restrict access to employment.

Youth work focus:

- Name where systems are failing young people,
- Avoid individualising institutional barriers,
- Support navigation, advocacy, and challenge.

4. Historical Racism

Racism is rooted in historical processes such as colonialism, forced assimilation, and exclusionary laws. These histories shaped institutions and norms that still influence outcomes today, even where policies claim to be neutral. Historical harm explains why inequality persists and why trust in institutions is often low.

Seeing it in practice:

- Long-term impacts of state policies aimed at erasing Traveller culture and nomadism.
- Intergenerational disadvantage in housing, health, and education.
- Family stories of discrimination that reflect systems still in operation.

Youth work focus:

- Connect young people's present-day experiences to historical context,
- Validate their lived realities,
- Challenge narratives that deny or erase past harm.

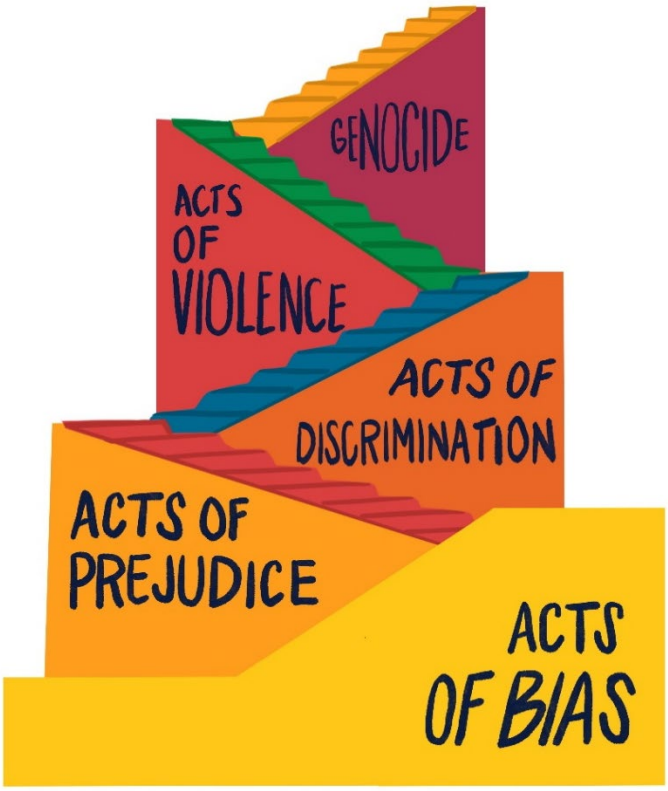
A tool for Racial Justice

When an experience of racism can be traced across all four dimensions, it signals a systemic issue that requires a Racial Justice response, not just individual intervention. By using the Quadrant, you can begin to understand and dismantle racial oppression in a sustained and meaningful way.

3.3 Identifying escalation of racism

Pyramid of Hate:

As youth workers, we often witness the early signs of hate in things that can be brushed off as “banter” or “not serious.” But hate rarely starts with violence. It builds gradually, beginning with everyday bias and, if left unchallenged, escalates into serious harm.



The Pyramid of Hate is a framework that helps us understand this escalation. The base of the pyramid is the largest, representing the everyday acts we’re most likely to encounter. Our role is to interrupt hate as early as possible, preventing harm and building justice.

Acts of Bias

This base layer involves everyday stereotypes, unconscious bias, microaggressions, and exclusionary assumptions. These are the subtle slights, jokes, rumours, and insensitive remarks that are frequent and reinforce the idea that some people are less valued.

Examples of bias:

- Insensitive remarks: Saying “That’s so gay” to dismiss something, or joking that “Black people are just naturally good at sports.”

- Microaggressions: Subtle slights that accumulate over time, like asking a Black person "Can I touch your hair?" or expressing surprise that a Traveller is in college.
- Exclusionary assumptions: Assuming a Black youth worker can't be Irish, or that "Muslim girls aren't allowed to speak up."

Even when the speaker means no harm, the impact is lasting. When left unchallenged, these everyday acts create an environment where bias is normalised, paving the way for more serious harm.

Acts of Prejudice

Prejudice takes bias a step further. It is when negative assumptions about a group lead to open hostility, exclusion, ridicule, slurs, and dehumanisation. This is where stereotyping becomes more deliberate and harmful.

Examples of prejudice:

- Verbal hostility: Using racial or homophobic slurs and name-calling.
- Social avoidance: Scapegoating a marginalised group for wider social problems or avoiding someone because of their ethnicity or religion.

These acts reduce people to caricatures and reinforce the idea that "they don't belong."

Acts of Discrimination

Discrimination is when prejudice is backed by institutional power. Exclusion or unfair treatment is built into the systems young people depend on — policies, structures, and services — treating people differently.

Examples of systemic discrimination:

- A Roma youth group being repeatedly denied access to a community hall.

- A Traveller family struggling to secure housing because of discriminatory rental practices.
- A Black teenager being stopped and searched more frequently than their white peers.
- A migrant young person being overlooked for school leadership roles because of unconscious bias within the structure.

Discrimination isolates and marginalises, often showing up in policies and procedures that are hard to challenge.

Acts of Violence

At this stage, hate becomes openly aggressive and targeted. People are victims of physical, emotional, or sexual violence, vandalism, threats, or murder because of their identity.

Examples of targeted violence in Ireland:

- Far-right protests against migrant and refugee communities involving looting, arson, and violent assaults.
- The burning of a house in Galway just before a Traveller family was due to move in.
- Physical attacks on young people perceived as LGBTQ+.

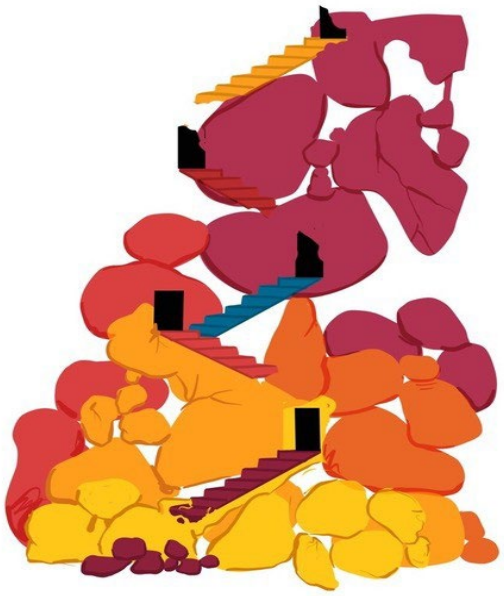
This violence doesn't come out of nowhere; it is built on the normalised biases, stereotypes, and systems that fail to protect at the layers below.

Genocide

Genocide is the most extreme expression of hate: the systematic destruction of an entire group, physically or culturally. Examples include the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, and the cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples. Young people may carry this trauma directly or through global connections.

Your Role: Interrupting Hate at the Base

Most of the harm you will encounter happens at the lower levels which are often dismissed as "not serious." But they are the foundation for everything above. By intervening early and consistently, we reshape the culture, one conversation and one decision at a time.



As a youth worker, you can:

- Consistently and deliberately interrupt stereotypes, assumptions, and microaggressions as they arise.
- Model anti-racist, inclusive practice in everything you do and create group norms that centre respect and belonging.
- Support young people affected by bias, exclusion, or violence.
- Help young people name what they're experiencing and build the tools to respond.

When we take hate seriously at the base of the pyramid, we are actively creating the conditions for equity, belonging, and justice. By diminishing the base, we are actively working to prevent escalation to greater harm.

3.4 Racism vs. Racial Discrimination between racialised groups:

Discrimination and harm can occur between people from racialised groups. This is something youth workers regularly see in practice and often do not know how to respond to it.

These dynamics do not exist outside of racism — they are shaped by it. They are a by-product of living in a society organised around racial hierarchies, where whiteness is centred and racialised communities are

positioned in unequal ways in relation to safety, belonging, and opportunity.

As this work continues to grow and evolve, so does the language we use to describe it. We use the term **racial discrimination** to name the tensions, harm, and challenges that can occur between racialised groups, where behaviours towards the other are shaped by perceptions of the other's ethnicity. We use the term deliberately, to clearly distinguish these dynamics from **racism**, which operates at a systemic and structural level.

Racism is a system of power. It is upheld through institutions, policies, and social norms that advantage some groups while marginalising others. When harm occurs between racialised groups, the individuals involved are not exercising institutional or structural power — they are navigating, and sometimes reproducing, the pressures of a racist system they did not create.

Naming this distinction matters. It allows us to acknowledge real harm without mislabelling it, and to respond in ways that address impact while keeping power, history, and context in view.

Reasons for tensions between racialised groups:

Tensions are often shaped by wider forces. They can be linked to:

- **Historical trauma** – war, displacement, genocide, or forced migration that communities carry across generations
- **Colonial divisions** – where some groups were positioned as "closer" to whiteness or granted limited privilege over others
- **Mistrust inherited from difficult pasts** – including conflict, persecution, or survival under oppressive regimes
- **Pressure from living in a racist system** – where safety, belonging, and resources feel scarce, and groups are pushed into competition

These tensions often show up as:

- **Prejudice** – stereotypes or assumptions such as "they're lazy" or "they think they're better than us"
- **Colourism** – favouring lighter skin or features closer to European beauty standards
- **Internalised racism** – absorbing the message that white culture, language, or ways of being are "better"
- **Blame-shifting** – holding other racialised groups responsible for racism experienced from the majority
- **Lateral violence** – harm between groups that grows out of shared oppression rather than real power

This harm damages trust, deepens division, and can fracture relationships between young people who are already navigating exclusion.

To respond adequately, we need to remember that it is a biproduct of racism but not systemic racism:

Why?

- The individuals involved do not hold institutional power
- Everyone involved is still navigating systems that centre whiteness and marginalise difference
- These dynamics are shaped by colonialism, anti-Blackness, and global inequalities, not created by young people themselves

Why This Matters in Youth Work

If all harm is treated as "the same," we miss the bigger picture and risk blaming young people for surviving systems they did not design or control.

As youth workers, our role is to hold both truths:
that harm is happening, and that it is happening within unequal systems.

This means we can:

- Name anti-Black racism, anti-Traveller racism, or other specific harms, even when they occur within racialised communities

- Recognise how internalised racism shapes how young people see themselves and each other
- Support young people to move from competition and mistrust toward solidarity and shared resistance

Doing this well helps young people understand that the problem is not each other — it is the systems that benefit from keeping them divided.

Note: In our context in Ireland, it is important to understand that anti-Traveller racism is deeply embedded and historically sustained. These attitudes are learned through exposure to dominant narratives, stereotypes and social norms that position Travellers as "problematic" and treated as other. This creates the conditions in which negative attitudes towards Travellers are absorbed and reproduced, including by migrants and other racialised groups who arrive in Ireland with little prior knowledge of Travellers or their history.

In this way, structural anti-Traveller racism acts as a dividing force between marginalised ethnic groups, obscuring shared experiences of exclusion and discrimination.

For many racialised people, it is only through involvement in youth work, community action and education, or collective organising that these parallels become visible, and that anti-Traveller racism is recognised as central to how racism operates in Ireland. Without naming and addressing this reality, our understanding of racism remains partial and risks reproducing the very hierarchies we seek to challenge.

In youth work practice, moments such as Traveller Pride Week can provide important opportunities to interrupt these dynamics. They create space for learning across communities, challenge internalised and inherited prejudices and support the development of solidarity grounded in a shared analysis of structural injustice rather than competition or division.

Key takeaways

- There is no social justice without Racial Justice.
- Racist oppression escalates when left unchallenged and normalised.
- Violence exists on a continuum, from everyday exclusion to extreme harm.
- Youth workers play a critical role in recognising early warning signs.

Reflective questions

- Where do I see everyday forms of racist harm being minimised or normalised?
- How do I recognise the process of escalation, rather than only responding once harm is visible?
- How confident am I in intervening early, and what support do I need to do so well?
- How do organisational cultures either challenge or enable racist injustice?

4

Power, Privilege and Racist Oppression

4.1 What is Privilege?

Defining Privilege

Privilege is a powerful but often invisible force that profoundly shapes people's lives. It refers to the unearned advantages that individuals gain by belonging to a dominant social group. These advantages can include easier access to resources, greater economic security, and broader social acceptance. Essentially, having privilege means not having to think about certain struggles because systems are designed to accommodate you.

Privilege and Intersecting Identities

Privilege is not a simple, one-dimensional concept. We are all made up of multiple, intersecting identities—our race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, and more. Each of these identities carries different levels of privilege or marginalisation depending on the context. For example, a white person in Ireland may experience racial privilege but still face class or gender-based discrimination. Likewise, someone who has experienced marginalisation in one area of their life may still hold privilege in another. Privilege is fluid and changes over our lifetime, increasing or decreasing with our circumstances.

Privilege and Power

People with greater levels of privilege invariably find that it is invisible to them. In fact, the most predominant marker of privilege is complete unawareness of its presence because it bestows rights and access. Privileged people tend to spend most time with others with similar

privileges – they go to the same schools and universities, live in the same neighbourhoods, and network with the same social group. If we grow up with privilege it takes us having life experiences that move us out of our privileged norms to see what reduced privileges look like. People with privilege do not want to let it go.

However, acknowledging our privilege allows us to enter into dialogue with others, it shows respect and humility and leads us toward a narrative based on our shared humanity. Most importantly it recognises that power comes with privilege, and it asks us to look at how we use that power.

Using the Wheel of Privilege to foster awareness and action

The Wheel of Privilege is a tool that helps us visualise the complexity of privilege. It allows us to look beyond a single aspect of identity and consider how different forms of privilege and oppression overlap. This framework reminds us that usually no one is simply privileged or oppressed; rather, we all exist within a dynamic web of power and inequality.

By using the Wheel of Privilege as a tool for reflection we can recognise the multi-faceted nature of our own privilege and ask ourselves how we have understood and used the privilege we have – whether from a place of greater privilege as an ally/advocate and from a place of less privilege to challenge the power dynamics around us.

WHEEL of PRIVILEGE

NYCI National Youth Council of Ireland

How to use the wheel of privilege as a tool for reflection

1. Take a pen and mark where you currently have privilege in each of the categories. Join all of these points together to form a circle.
2. Using a different coloured pen, mark where you had privilege in each of the categories at earlier points in your life (these may or may not have been different to your current situation). Join these points together to form another circle.
3. Look at what you have drawn and reflect on how your identity and life experiences have shaped how much – or how little - power and privilege you hold/held and how you use/have used them.

4.2 Power and Racial Justice

Power is often understood too narrowly — usually as domination, control, or something held only by institutions and authorities. When power is framed only in this way, it can feel distant or fixed, it can feel like there isn't much we can do about it,

This limited understanding matters. It shapes how youth workers and organisations see their role in creating change. If power is understood only as something that belongs to "those above," it can lead to disengagement, over-reliance on awareness-raising alone, or well-intentioned approaches that overlook how inequality actually operates.

Racial Justice work requires a more accurate and grounded understanding of power: one that recognises power as relational, contextual, and expressed in multiple ways — not all of them oppressive, and none of them neutral in their impact.

Understanding power means being able to see how decisions are made, are there voices that have more weights than others? This is why power mapping is a critical tool in Racial Justice work — it helps us move from good intentions to informed, strategic action.

When power is seen only as domination exercised through institutions or authority, or individuals with access to means that could harm you, it can

paralyse action. It obscures the ways power is exercised in everyday interactions, cultural norms, professional roles, and collective spaces. It can also prevent people from recognising the power they already hold — and the responsibility that comes with it.

In anti-racism work, this limiting view often leads to approaches that assume education alone will shift attitudes and behaviours, without examining how power shapes the value given to voices, it shapes what might influence outcomes and it also shapes what way messages are received and perceived

Similarly, attempts to “bring everyone to the table” without analysing power differences can unintentionally reproduce inequality. When power dynamics are ignored, participation becomes uneven: some voices dominate, others are sidelined, and those most affected by racism have the least influence over decisions.

Power is present in every interaction and every relationship. It is never evenly distributed — someone will always hold more of a particular kind of power than someone else. What matters is not pretending this imbalance doesn’t exist but being aware of it. When power is recognised and reflected on, it can be held in check and used responsibly. When it goes unexamined, it can easily tip into harm, exclusion, or unfairness.

A commitment to Racial Justice means intentionally paying attention to power — how it is distributed, how it operates, and how it can be re-oriented toward equity.

Expressions of power

Power is not a single thing. It is expressed in different ways, all of which can be used to maintain inequality or to advance justice, depending on the values, awareness, and context shaping them.

Power Over: (Control, authority, decision-making)

Power Over refers to the capacity to influence or determine outcomes for others — through control of resources, rules, access, or decision-making. It is the expression of power most commonly associated with domination and oppression, because it is the one most often abused.

When shaped by racism, Power Over operates to privilege some groups while marginalising others. This can show up in who sets policies, who controls funding, whose behaviour is policed, and whose needs are prioritised. In these cases, Power Over excludes racialised communities from access, participation, and rights, reinforcing inequality.

However, Power Over is not inherently oppressive. It also exists in safeguarding responsibilities, organisational leadership, and legal accountability. The critical question is how it is exercised, in whose interests, and with what accountability.

In Racial Justice work, Power Over must be named, challenged, and, where possible, re-directed or limited — not ignored.

Power Within: (Critical awareness, self-worth, inner orientation)

Power Within is the internal foundation that shapes how all other forms of power are used. It includes self-knowledge, critical consciousness, a sense of worth, and the ability to imagine alternatives.

This is where Racial Justice work begins and continues. Power Within is developed through reflection on identity, values, beliefs, bias, privilege, internalised racism, and positionality. It is strengthened in spaces that support dialogue, thinking with others, learning, and shared analysis.

Without Power Within, Power To and Power With can be easily co-opted or distorted by dominant norms. With it, they can be oriented toward justice, accountability, and transformation.

Power With: *(*Collective capacity, solidarity, shared action*)*

Power With refers to the ability to act together. It emerges through relationships, trust, shared purpose, and collaboration. It is often described as collective strength, but it is not automatically equitable.

Power With can be shaped by Power Over when dominant voices set the agenda, define priorities, or control decision-making within groups. Without attention to 'race' , privilege, and access, collective spaces can reproduce the same exclusions they aim to resist.

When grounded in Power Within — self-awareness, accountability, and critical reflection — Power With can support Racial Justice by building solidarity across difference, redistributing influence, and creating space for leadership from those most affected by racism.

This form of power is essential for movement-building, community organising, and youth work practice — but only when power dynamics

within the collective are actively examined and addressed, as illustrated in the Ethiopian proverb *'When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion.'*

Power To *(Agency, action, capacity to intervene)*

Power To refers to the capacity to act — to make choices, take initiative, and influence change. It is often associated with individual agency, but it is always shaped by context.

In racist systems, Power To is unevenly distributed. Some people's actions are amplified and legitimised, while others are constrained, punished, or ignored. This is why Power To cannot be understood in isolation from Power Over and structural conditions.

When rooted in Power Within, Power To becomes a critical starting point for change. It allows youth workers and young people to identify where they can intervene, resist harm, support others, or shift practice — even within constrained systems.

Racial Justice work requires supporting Power To strategically, recognising both its potential and its limits.

Dimensions of Power: How power operates in society

Power also operates across different dimensions. Understanding these helps youth workers move beyond surface-level responses and develop more effective Racial Justice strategies.

Visible Power: *(Formal rules, decisions, institutions)*

Visible Power includes laws, policies, institutions, and official decision-making processes. These are the most recognisable forms of power and

are often assumed to be neutral. In practice, visible power often reflects and reinforces racial inequality through policies that disproportionately harm minority ethnic communities — even when framed as fair or objective. These are sites where advocacy, accountability, and policy engagement can challenge injustice.

Hidden Power: *(*Agenda-setting, framing, influence*)*

Hidden Power shapes what issues are discussed, how problems are framed, and which voices are taken seriously. It operates through media, funding priorities, political narratives, and institutional culture. In Racial Justice work, hidden power often deflects attention away from structural causes of harm and toward narratives that blame individuals or communities. To bring awareness to this dimension of power we can ask: Who decides what matters? Whose interests are protected by this framing?

Invisible Power: (Norms, beliefs, internalisation*)*

Invisible Power shapes how people understand themselves and the world. It operates through socialisation, education, media, and culture, influencing what feels "normal," possible, or acceptable. This is where racism can become internalised — shaping identity, aspiration, and belonging. Because it operates below conscious awareness, it is the hardest to challenge and the most deeply rooted.

Youth work plays a critical role here by creating spaces for reflection, naming what has been normalised, and supporting young people to question whose stories and standards they have inherited.

Why This Matters

Racial Justice requires the ability to see power clearly, to understand how it moves, and to choose how to engage with it. Power mapping is a practical

tool that helps youth workers identify where harm is being produced, where responsibility lies, and where intervention is possible.

By understanding power as multi-dimensional and relational, youth workers are better equipped to act with clarity, accountability, and purpose in the work of Racial Justice.

Power Mapping for Racial Justice: A critical analysis exercise for youth workers

Power Mapping can support youth workers to identify how power operates in a specific situation, how racism is maintained or challenged, and where there is real scope for intervention. This exercise is about developing clarity so your responses to racism are informed, strategic, and grounded in reality.

Step 1: Name the Situation

Choose a real or recent situation from your work where racism, racial discrimination, or exclusion was present.

This could be:

- a racist incident between young people
- a policy or rule that disproportionately impacts racialised young people
- a programme decision that limited participation or voice
- a narrative or assumption shaping how young people are treated

Write a short description of what happened, focusing on impact rather than intent.

Step 2: Map the Expressions of Power

For this situation, identify how each expression of power is operating.

Power Over: • Who is making decisions that affect others? • Who controls resources, rules, access, or consequences? • Where is authority being exercised, and in whose interests?	**Power With** • Where are people acting collectively? • Who is included or excluded from "we"? • Are some voices carrying more weight within the group than others?
Power Within • How are identity, values, beliefs, possible internalised racism and personal history and past experiences shaping behaviour? • Who feels entitled to speak or challenge? Who feels they must stay quiet? • What beliefs about race, belonging, or "normality" are operating?	**Power To** • Who is able to act or intervene in this situation? • Whose actions are supported, amplified, or legitimised? • Whose capacity to act is constrained or discouraged?

Step 3: Identify the Dimensions of Power

Now look at how power operates across the three dimensions.

Visible Power	Hidden Power	Invisible Power
• Who are all the actors involved in this situation and what are their respective roles? • What policies, rules, procedures, or formal decisions are involved? • Who designed them? Who enforces them? Who is impacted?	• What narratives, priorities, or assumptions shape how this issue is framed? • What is being talked about — and what is not? • Who benefits from the issue being framed this way?	• What norms or beliefs feel "common sense" in this situation? • How is whiteness, neutrality, or "fairness" being assumed or protected? • How might internalised racism be shaping responses?

Step 4: Locate yourself and your role

As a youth worker or organisation, reflect honestly:

- Where do you hold Power Over, Power With, or Power To in this situation?
- Where are you constrained by systems, policy, or hierarchy?
- Where might your own assumptions or comfort be limiting action?

Step 5: Identify Points for Racial Justice Action

Using the map, identify specific and realistic interventions.

Ask:

- Where could Power Over be challenged, redistributed, or made accountable?
- Where could Power With be strengthened in ways that centre racialised voices?
- Where could Power To be supported or expanded for young people?
- What work is needed to strengthen Power Within — in yourself or others?

Choose one or two actions that are:

- within your influence,
- aligned with Racial Justice,
- and responsive to the actual power dynamics at play.

Why this matters

Power mapping helps shift responses to racism from reactive to intentional. It supports youth workers to see beyond individual behaviour and engage with the systems, narratives, and norms that shape harm. Used regularly, this tool builds the analytical muscle needed to practice Racial Justice with clarity, accountability, and care.

4.3 Whiteness, white supremacy, and why it's so hard to talk about it

As we explore power and privilege in youth work, we need to name one of the systems that keeps these in place: whiteness — and the ideology of white supremacy that sustains it.

For many, the phrase *white supremacy* immediately brings to mind images of violent hate groups. That association can shut down meaningful conversation before it even begins. But white supremacy is not only about individuals with extreme views. It is a belief system, woven into the very foundations of institutions, that positions white people — usually of European descent — and their ways of speaking, living, and being as superior. This ideology has shaped the modern world and continues to shape how society works today.

White supremacy isn't always loud. Often, it is quiet, embedded in rules, norms, and assumptions that pass as neutral or "just the way things are." It influences who is trusted, who is listened to, whose knowledge counts, and who is given space to lead. It shapes whose history is taught in schools and whose is left out. These are patterns and not random oversights. And these patterns help keep white people in positions of unspoken advantage.

To talk about white supremacy we need to get comfortable with talking about whiteness. Whiteness is not about skin colour alone. It is about a social, cultural, and political construct that distributes unearned advantages to those seen as white. Whiteness determines who belongs, who feels safe, who is considered "normal," and who has access to power, opportunity, and respect.

In Ireland, whiteness operates in ways specific to the local context.

Some Travellers, and indeed others from racialised or minoritised ethnic groups, may experience what we call *skin privilege*. This refers to the unearned advantage some people have because their skin tone appears light or "white-looking" to others. They may not actively seek to 'pass' as white, nor do they deny their identity but the way they are perceived can

mean they encounter fewer immediate barriers or avoid some forms of overt racism, especially in situations where their ethnicity is not known. Skin privilege can result in moments of safety, access, or assumed belonging that others with darker skin are denied. It's a contextual and conditional form of privilege, not total immunity from racism, but a shifting threshold of harm and acceptance based on appearance.

This is different from *white passing*, a term that historically refers to people from racialised backgrounds who actively concealed their identity to be accepted as white, often for survival. This concept has particular historical weight in the US context, where African Americans who could "pass" as white might do so to escape racial violence, segregation, or legal disenfranchisement. Passing was not about privilege alone; it was often a painful, risky decision involving the erasure of family, culture, and community. In contemporary use, white passing sometimes gets misapplied as a blanket description, but it's important to understand its roots in systems where whiteness was normative and violently enforced.

Being perceived as white, whether through skin privilege or white passing, does not erase someone's experience of racism or cultural exclusion. But it does shape how they may be read in certain spaces, and how systems of power respond to them. These dynamics are complex and require us to speak with care, recognising both the impact of racialisation and the shifting privileges that appearance can offer. We need language that respects these lived realities without flattening or erasing how they are experienced.

For many racialised young people and youth workers, naming whiteness feels taboo in Ireland. For white settled youth workers, these conversations often stir up guilt, shame, defensiveness, or fear of being blamed. These reactions are understandable, but they often become obstacles: because this is not about personal blame. It is about seeing the wider picture of how racism is sustained, and how whiteness shapes what is considered "normal".

This is when understanding white fragility (mainly through the work of Robin DiAngelo) helps us. White fragility is about how white people are

socialised to expect racial comfort, and how they often react defensively when that comfort is challenged. For youth workers, recognising this is essential. If we shut down when racism is named, we cannot support young people with the fairness, empathy, and accountability they deserve.

White fragility shows up in many predictable ways:

- Getting defensive or upset when racism is named.
- Saying "I don't see colour," instead of engaging with a young person, or a racialised colleague's lived reality.
- Responding with "I'm not racist!" when challenged, which recentres white comfort instead of addressing the harm.
- Avoiding conversations about Travellers, refugees, or racialised communities because it feels "too heavy" or "too political."
- Minimising harm with comments like "I'm sure they didn't mean it."

In practice, these reactions protect white comfort, but they also protect racism, by shutting down honest dialogue and leaving racialised young people unheard or unsupported.

Challenging racism is uncomfortable. It can feel awkward, risky, even painful. But youth work has always been about standing beside young people, especially when it's hard. If we want to build truly anti-racist spaces, we need to get comfortable with discomfort, stay engaged even when challenged, and commit to ongoing reflection and learning.

Moving beyond fragility involves:

- **Building self-awareness:** Notice defensiveness, pause, and ask: Am I protecting my own comfort, or centring the young person's needs?
- **Practicing humility:** Accept that mistakes are part of learning. Listen without rushing to defend yourself.
- **Staying engaged:** Resist the urge to withdraw. Use discomfort as a signal for growth
- **Committing to reflection:** Seek out anti-racist training, engage with Irish resources on privilege and systems of oppression, and share reflections with colleagues.

  When youth workers take these steps, they model accountability. They show young people — especially racialised young people — that their voices matter, that harm will be named, and that silence will not be the final word. They build trust and create safer spaces where racism can be spoken about and challenged.

Ultimately, overcoming fragility and naming whiteness is not about white workers' comfort. It is about ensuring that young people — particularly those facing racism — receive the safety, support, and justice they deserve in youth work settings.

Key takeaways

- Power shapes whose voices are heard, whose needs are met, and whose realities are centred.
- Privilege is not about individual blame but about unequal access to power and opportunity.
- Whiteness operates as an unspoken norm that is difficult but necessary to name.
- Change requires working with power: power within, power with, and power to act.

Reflective questions

- In what ways have I benefited from systems of privilege, knowingly or unknowingly?
- Whose voices are missing or marginalised in my organisation or youth space?
- When have I shared or redistributed power in my practice, and what enabled that?
- What blocks me from using my power more intentionally for Racial Justice?

5

Racial Justice and Responsive Youth Work

5.1 Impact of racism on young people

NYCI's research and consultations with young people consistently shows that racism has a deep and lasting impact on young people's wellbeing, identity, sense of belonging and life chances. For minority ethnic young people, racism is rarely experienced as a single incident. Instead, it is a cumulative and often normalised part of everyday life, occurring across schools, public spaces, services, online environments and peer relationships.

Young people describe experiences ranging from microaggressions and stereotyping to overt racist abuse, racial profiling and exclusion. These experiences are not only interpersonal; they are reinforced by weak institutional responses, silence from bystanders, and systems that fail to acknowledge or address harm. Over time, this produces a sense that racism is tolerated, minimised, or simply "part of life".

A significant impact of racism is on identity and belonging. Many young people report being treated as perpetual outsiders — questioned about where they are "really from", judged by accent, appearance, name or cultural background, or denied recognition as Irish. This constant othering undermines young people's sense of self and can lead to internalised racism, self-doubt, and pressure to hide or downplay aspects of identity in order to fit in.

Racism also has serious mental health impacts. Young people describe relentless attacks on their self-esteem, feelings of shame, emotional exhaustion and isolation. Many struggle with an internal tension between wanting to challenge racist behaviour and wanting to avoid further harm or escalation. When reporting racism leads to dismissal, disbelief or further

scrutiny, young people are more likely to disengage, withdraw or self-protect rather than seek support.

Schools consistently emerge as a key site where racism is experienced and reproduced. Young people report biased disciplinary practices, lower expectations, racial slurs, stereotyping, curriculum invisibility and weak responses from staff.

These experiences affect educational engagement, confidence and progression, particularly for Traveller, Roma and Black young people. Similar patterns are reported across access to employment, housing, healthcare and policing, where discrimination is often subtle, difficult to prove, and emotionally draining to challenge.

Racism also shapes young people's experiences of integration. Many minority ethnic young people express a strong desire to belong and to participate fully in Irish society. However, integration is often experienced as a one-sided expectation to adapt, assimilate or stay silent, rather than a shared process requiring change within institutions, communities and services.

Young people emphasise the importance of culturally competent, trusted adults and spaces where they can explore identity, belonging and difference without fear of judgement.

Importantly, young people's experiences in this are not uniform. The impact of racism is intensified when it intersects with class, gender, disability, religion, migration status or experiences of poverty, care or displacement. Young people from Traveller, Roma, refugee and migrant backgrounds often face layered exclusion, while white young people from Eastern European or Ukrainian backgrounds may experience racialisation and xenophobia despite being racially read as white.

Across all our consultations, young people consistently identify youth work spaces as among the few environments where they feel safe, heard and respected. Youth work is experienced as a counter-space to racism — offering protection, trust, solidarity and opportunities to process harm collectively. Understanding the impact of racism on young people is

therefore not optional: it is foundational to inclusive, anti-racist and transformative youth work practice.

This analysis is informed by a body of youth-led research and consultations carried out by NYCI and partners between 2017–2025, grounded in the lived experiences of minority ethnic young people across Ireland.

Key themes that have surfaced

- Racism is normalised and cumulative, it is not exceptional
- It impacts on identity, belonging and self-worth
- Schools are a primary site of harm
- Microaggressions, stereotyping, and racial profiling are prolific
- Structural barriers exist across education, employment, housing, and healthcare
- Emotional and mental health impacts on young people include shame, exhaustion, withdrawal, and hopelessness
- Damage is caused by silence, dismissal (of their experience), and weak institutional responses
- The importance of safe spaces, trusted adults and youth work was stressed

5.2 Engaging with young people's different needs

Needs-based practice is foundational to youth work. It guides us to look at what's beneath the surface, to see beyond "challenging behaviour" or disengagement and instead ask:

- ✓ **What might this young person need?**
- ✓ **What might they be navigating?**
- ✓ **What support could unlock their full participation and treat them with dignity?**

When we apply this practice through a Racial Justice lens, we begin to see that young people experience the world — and our services — in very different ways depending on how racism intersects with their identities. Their needs cannot be addressed through a "one size fits all" model. Youth work through the Racial Justice lens means approaching three key groups of young people with differing clarity and intention:

a) Racialised young people

Racialised young people move through the world carrying both visible and invisible burdens; the impact of direct harm, daily microaggressions, cultural erasure, and systemic disadvantage. In youth settings, these harms may not always be dramatic or obvious. Sometimes they take the form of being repeatedly asked "where are you really from," or being expected to represent their entire cultural group. Sometimes it's in being passed over for leadership, or never seeing their identity reflected in posters, books, or staff.

However, the weight of racism often comes from **accumulated experiences** and the slow erosion of their sense of belonging caused by being misunderstood, misnamed, or made to feel invisible again and again.

Their needs are not simply about protection, they are about discovering their power, about connection, and wholeness. These young people may need:

- **Safety** — not just freedom from overt harm or bullying, but safety to show up fully without having to be "on guard." This includes psychological and cultural safety: being able to relax, be yourself, and not brace for racism or discrimination.
- **Affirmation** — regular, intentional recognition that their identities and experiences matter. That they don't need to prove themselves, explain their culture, or shrink to fit in.
- **Voice** — the opportunity to name their experiences of racism or exclusion without being dismissed, derailed, or told to "get over it and

move on." Having their reality affirmed and not debated is a powerful act of care.

- **Representation** — Young people need to see themselves reflected in leadership, in programming, and in the materials around them, as part of the everyday fabric of the service. Their presence should feel expected and valued, not conditional or symbolic. Meaningful representation must happen on their own terms. It's important that young people aren't burdened with the expectation of representing an entire community, or multiple communities, just because they are present. No young person should be positioned as a spokesperson for their identity group. Representation here means making space for their voices, not relying on them to carry the weight of everyone else's experience.
- **Passion and Leadership** — racialised young people are more than the racism they face or the issues they are struggling with. They need spaces where they can build solidarity, be creative, figure out their skills, their passions and what kind of leaders they want to be.

Importantly, racialised young people are not all the same. Needs will differ depending on ethnicity, religion, gender, migration status, language, skin tone, and more. For example, a Black Irish young woman born and raised locally to the youth service will face different challenges to a recently arrived Roma teen, a Muslim boy whose parents facing surveillance at work, or a young Traveller woman being excluded from school. What connects them is the experience of navigating racism — often silently — within systems not designed for them.

Youth workers can act as buffers, advocates, and bridge-builders in these moments. By truly centring the needs of racialised young people, we create spaces that begin to undo harm and foster genuine belonging.

Note on working with young Travellers and young people of colour

In some communities, far-right agitators actively try to pit young Travellers against young people of colour. This tactic relies on exploiting real

experiences of exclusion, competition for resources, and long-standing racism faced by Travellers, while redirecting anger away from the systems that are at fault and toward other racialised groups.

Youth workers need to approach these situations with particular care. Travellers are an indigenous community who experience a distinct and deeply rooted form of racism in Ireland, shaped by generations of state neglect, discrimination, and cultural erasure. At the same time, young people of colour are navigating racism linked to global racial hierarchies, anti-Blackness, migration, and border regimes. These experiences are not the same, but they are connected.

When tensions arise, it is important not to flatten or compare harms, or to frame this as a "conflict between communities." Instead, youth workers can draw on the section in Chapter 3 on racial discrimination between racialised groups to understand how racism creates conditions where groups are positioned against each other, often in the service of maintaining existing power structures.

This work should not be done in isolation. Where possible, youth workers should take leadership and guidance from Traveller youth workers, Traveller organisations, and community leaders who are best placed to navigate the specific histories, sensitivities, and internal dynamics involved. Their insight is critical in holding space for Traveller experiences without reinforcing narratives that harm other racialised young people.

The aim is not to force unity or silence difference, but to support young people to recognise how racism operates across communities, to name when harm is being redirected, and to resist being used to uphold the systems that marginalise them all in different ways.

b) White settled young people

White young people are usually at the centre of youth services in Ireland. Youth work programmes, norms, and cultural references tend to reflect white majority culture. Yet many white settled young people, particularly those from working-class communities, also live with significant

intergenerational disadvantages: economic hardship, social exclusion, under-resourced services, and community stigma.

These young people often grow up in areas that have been historically abandoned by the state, experiencing the impact of austerity, unemployment, and trauma. They may feel judged, overlooked, or stereotyped by schools, media, and authority figures. Their experience of injustice is real and deserves respect and support.

And yet, whiteness continues to shape how they are treated in wider systems. They may not face racial profiling, and their skin colour is not marked as "suspicious" or "foreign" but their names, addresses, or accents may still be judged. This layered experience can make conversations with them about privilege difficult. Understandably, some may ask:

- "How can I be privileged when I've had nothing?"
- "Why are we being blamed when we didn't do anything?"

Youth workers have a crucial role to play in supporting these young people to navigate this complexity, neither dismissing their struggles nor ignoring the role of whiteness in shaping how they are treated in wider systems. To support white settled young people in developing a Racial Justice lens, youth workers can offer:

- **Critical education:** through programmes and projects as well as during casual conversations invite young people to think critically. Introduce ideas of power, power mapping or even the quadrant of oppression; by supporting young people to explore how advantage works in society it can help them see how multiple systems overlap and understand that their racial privilege can exist alongside class oppression.
- **Capacity for discomfort:** provide guidance on how to sit with the complexity that they may be marginalised in some ways and privileged in others. This emotional literacy is key to building resilience and solidarity.

- **Identity work:** give space to explore who they are, where they come from, and what it means to belong to a community without defining that identity through dominance or exclusion.
- **Solidarity building:** create opportunities to connect across differences. This includes learning how to listen when others share painful experiences, how to act when harm happens, and how to stand alongside others.

White settled young people are not the "problem" in Racial Justice work. They are essential to the solution. When they are supported to engage meaningfully, they can become allies, bridge-builders, and leaders in challenging racism from within their own communities.

A note on whiteness, migration and racialisation

While whiteness is a position of structural advantage in Irish society, it is important to recognise that not all young people who are read as white experience whiteness in the same way.

Some white young people, particularly those from migrant backgrounds such as Ukrainian refugees or young people from Eastern European countries, may experience racialisation, exclusion and discrimination linked to nationality, language, accent, migration status, class, or being perceived as outsiders. This can include being stereotyped, othered, or treated as less legitimate or less deserving of a sense of belonging, despite being racially read as white.

In these contexts, young people may experience harm — including stigma, hostility, or exclusion — without holding the same level of racial power or protection as white settled Irish young people. Their whiteness may offer partial or conditional protection in some situations, while in others it is overridden by migration status, xenophobia, or class-based prejudice.

For youth workers, this requires a both/and approach:

- recognising that whiteness still operates as a system of racial hierarchy and power,

- while also acknowledging the real and harmful experiences of racialisation, discrimination and exclusion faced by some white migrant young people.

Holding this nuance allows youth work practice to remain grounded in a Racial Justice analysis; while responding appropriately to the lived experiences of young people whose identities sit at the intersection of whiteness, migration, class and displacement.

c) Young people causing racial harm

There will be moments when a young person says or does something that causes racial harm. This could be a slur, a joke, a comment, an act of exclusion or even silence in the face of someone else's pain. Sometimes it will be intentional, and it could possibly escalate, and serious harm can result from young people being involved in racial hate crimes. What we know in youth work, from the experience of working with some of the most marginalised young people, is that their behaviour is often the product of social exclusion, social conditioning, peer culture, or inherited beliefs.

Our task as youth workers is not to label these young people as racist and push them out. Nor is it to protect them from the consequences of their actions. It is to hold a space where accountability and growth can happen together.

These young people need:

- **Boundaries** — a clear, consistent message that racism is unacceptable. Harm must be named. The impact must be acknowledged, regardless of intent.
- **Reflection** — opportunities to understand the impact of their actions. Not just to accept "I didn't mean it," responses but to ask them: "What happened? Why? Who was hurt? What's my role here?"
- **Repair** — where possible, a chance to listen, to apologise, and to restore trust. Not all harm can be repaired quickly, but modelling this process teaches accountability.

- **Growth** — support to question where their words or behaviours come from. What have they learned at home, in school, online? How can they unlearn these ideas and grow into someone who makes a different choice next time?

It's important to understand that many young people who cause racial harm are themselves immersed in cultures where these behaviours are normalised — by adults, media, peer groups, and wider social narratives. Dismissing them as "just bad kids" does not address the root of the harm. At the same time, protecting them from discomfort or consequence does not support growth, accountability, or change.

Responses must be **proportionate to the harm caused**. Not all incidents carry the same weight, and interventions need to reflect the level of damage done, the impact on those harmed, and the broader context in which the behaviour occurred. A one-size-fits-all response risks either minimising serious harm or overreacting in ways that shut down learning.

Behaviour is communication, but harm is still harm. Responding to underlying needs — such as the need to belong, to be seen, or to make sense of the world — is essential, but it cannot come at the expense of those who have been hurt. Restorative approaches should always centre the safety, agency, and willingness of those harmed. Participation in restorative processes must be a choice, not an expectation.

When those harmed are unwilling or unable to engage, this does not remove the need for accountability. Youth workers still have a responsibility to name the harm, set clear boundaries, and apply appropriate consequences, while continuing to work with the young person who caused harm to understand impact, take responsibility, and change behaviour. (See Transforming Hate Manual & Activity Resource - National Youth Council of Ireland).

Youth workers hold a powerful role here: to respond in ways that are firm and fair, rooted in care but not permissive, and capable of holding both learning and accountability. When done well, even difficult moments can

become opportunities to interrupt cycles of harm and support more just and responsible ways of relating.

5.3 Naming race, racism and Racial Justice in a youth service

To meet the needs of all young people, we need to be aware of what impacts them, this means talking about race, racism, and racial injustice. Yet many youth workers, especially those who are white, settled or grew up in environments where 'race' wasn't openly discussed, feel unsure how to talk about it.

That hesitation is understandable. 'Race' is often treated as too political, too complex, or too risky. Some fear saying the wrong thing. Others worry it will create division. And whiteness, in particular, often functions as an unspoken norm.

This is why youth spaces need to be **brave spaces** — where discomfort is expected, where people can speak honestly, ask questions, and be gently challenged. It also means protecting racialised young people from being expected to teach others or relive harm in the name of learning.

Using terms like "Black," "Traveller," "Roma," or "racialised" can feel unfamiliar at first. But avoiding these words can create greater harm: silence, exclusion, invisibility. When not sure, ask how someone wants to be described that day, our identities are fluid and we don't all feel the same every day. Listen. Follow their lead. Be open to correction, whether from a colleague, a young person, or by reconnecting with your own values.

Avoiding conversations about racism does not protect young people. It isolates them. It leaves racialised young people carrying the weight of racism alone and teaches white settled young people that this isn't their work. It allows systems of harm to continue unchecked.

In a context of rising hate and hostility, racism and far-right narratives in Ireland, silence is no longer an option. A diverse society demands more than passive inclusion. It calls for action rooted in care, honesty, and the willingness to get uncomfortable.

Talking about ‘race’ and racism: tips & reminders

- Silence about ‘race’ won’t stop racism: Invite the words in. Naming racism opens space for young people to speak their truth.
- Race is a social construct that has real impact: Acknowledge both. The impact is real lived experience, not just a construct.
- Young people notice when we avoid hard topics: Discomfort is OK. Leaning into it builds trust.
- Identities deserve to be seen and named: Use accurate terms and pronouns. Language is part of representation.
- This isn’t about blame; it’s about fairness and dignity: Frame conversations around shared values: “Everyone deserves to belong.”
- Defensiveness shuts down dialogue. Curiosity opens it: Ask open questions: “Can you tell me more?” rather than “Are you sure?”
- Racial harm can be subtle and repeated: Take small things seriously — they often point to larger patterns.
- Young people who cause harm still need care: Set clear boundaries and stay connected. Growth happens through relationship.
- Racial Justice is not just about harm: Create space for pride, joy, and leadership.

You don’t have to be an expert, but you do have to begin somewhere. Let young people lead. Be honest about what you don’t know. Learn together.

No one will do this work perfectly. Racial Justice is not a checklist — it’s a practice of presence. It grows in community, through reflection, and in the daily choices we make. Every voice matters. And naming ‘race’ and racism is part of building a youth service where young people know they belong, where their truth is heard, and where new possibilities can take root.

Key takeaways

- Racism has profound impacts on young people's wellbeing, identity and sense of belonging.
- Young people experience racism differently depending on their identities and contexts.
- Naming race and racism is a necessary part of creating inclusive youth spaces.
- Youth work must respond to real needs, not assume a level playing field.

Reflective questions

- How do young people in my setting experience racism, exclusion or belonging?
- Whose needs are prioritised in my service, and whose are overlooked?
- How do I name race and racism in ways that are clear, informed and supportive?
- Where might I be unintentionally reproducing harm through silence or avoidance?

6

Creating Change

6.1 Racial Justice lens - Seeing racial *in*justice

Racial Justice goes beyond challenging racism. It is the long-term commitment to investing in an equitable and fair future, allowing space to dream, imagine, and build alternatives where repair and healing are possible. This work is a fundamental shift in how we understand our role, our power, and our responsibility as youth workers.

It means recognising that we are part of a larger ecosystem of people, relationships, and systems that either reproduce harm or actively work to transform it.

Getting ready for change (The mindset shift)

Creating change requires us to align our values with our daily practice: with our decisions, our responses to harm, and the way our organisations function.

Embrace discomfort and conflict

It is common for organisations to outsource the "tricky parts" (like responding to racism) to consultants or confine them to training sessions. However, meaningful change demands leadership, internal courage, and emotional resilience.

Discomfort, resistance, or conflict are not signs of failure; they are necessary parts of the process. As youth workers, this can mean holding space when colleagues say something harmful, when a young person challenges us, or when our organisation falls short. Naming truths, listening

to those truths, and staying in the room are part of building the trust that is key to transformation.

Building alignment before seeking tools (Internal readiness)

When faced with challenges unfamiliar to us, organisations often rush to find the right "tool" (training, policies, toolkits). But tools without shared analysis are hollow. Before introducing new strategies, teams must develop a shared understanding of power, privilege, and racism.

Building shared clarity

- Talk openly about racism and whiteness (not just "diversity").
- Understand the difference between anti-racism and Racial Justice.
- Name the root causes of racial harm in youth settings.
- Listen to minoritised colleagues and young people without tokenism.
- Remember that change needs clarity: What are we trying to change and why?

Take collective responsibility—but don't wait for consensus

Change can't be stalled while waiting for everyone to feel comfortable. Power imbalance is real in hierarchical systems. It's essential to ensure change is sustained through updated structures and is not dependent on individual personalities.

As a youth work team, commit to:

- Be honest about your team's current dynamics — acknowledge who usually speaks and who stays silent.
- Share responsibility for Racial Justice; don't leave it to the one person of colour on staff or the one passionate white settled staff member.
- Make time to reflect on resistance: What fears are present (e.g., "Will I get it wrong?" "What does this mean for me?")

Let those most affected be centred in the work

Those most impacted by injustice must be centred in shaping solutions. This principle applies to all our relationships:

With young people:

- Support racialised young people to go beyond just "sharing their stories,"
- Invite them to shape projects, lead responses, and envision new systems.

With staff and partners:

- Support minoritised youth workers to take leadership without placing the full burden of the work on them.
- Build authentic, reciprocal relationships with partners and communities, and be mindful of extractive practices (like inviting a minority group in as a partner in a funding application but not equally dividing the funding applied for.)

It's important to be vigilant and not fall into the trap of doing Racial Justice work *on* communities or relying on people of colour only when it suits a funding proposal or project plan. If you consult racialised young people, colleagues, or community leaders on racism they can't be left out of the decision-making that follows.

Key principles: a reminder

- See racism as historical, systemic, and structural, not only interpersonal.
- Recognise the ways whiteness shapes our ideas of "normal" in youth services.
- Actively identify who is centred, excluded, or harmed in programmes and practices.
- Prioritise the voices, needs, and leadership of racialised young people.

For racialised young people, this approach signals that they matter, and creates spaces where they can exist without having to defend their right to belong. For white settled young people, it provides pathways to question inherited biases and step into responsibility and solidarity. This cannot be a technical "add-on", it needs to be the way of practicing the core values of the youth work profession.

6.2 NYCI's Racial Justice lens and how to apply it:

The Four-Step Tool: From naming harm to shifting power

Adopting a Racial Justice lens requires us to look at every programme, conversation, or policy choice as a **"choice point"**: a moment where we can either reinforce inequity or shift practice toward justice. These steps turn the lens from an abstract principle into a daily practice of reflection and action.

Name it **Bring 'Race' into view**	**Map power** **Look beyond individual behaviour**
Shift power **Change how responses are designed**	**Stay with it** **Embed equity as ongoing practice**

1. Name it

The first step is to explicitly bring "race", as the harmful construct it is, into view. This means asking: Where is 'race' showing up in this issue — and where is it being avoided, overlooked, or silenced? Too often, decisions are made without naming race, allowing the dynamics of whiteness and racial exclusion to continue unchecked.

Whether you're responding to a safeguarding concern, setting up a new programme, writing policy, or handling a staff issue — the lens prompts you to ask**:** Is racial harm a factor here? How are racialised young people being impacted?

Naming 'race' does not mean making assumptions or assigning blame. It means acknowledging that we live and work within systems shaped by histories of racism and exclusion, and that those systems don't disappear just because we don't talk about them.

2. Map the Power

Once "race" has been named, the next step is to understand the deeper patterns at play. That means shifting focus from individual behaviour to the structures, norms, and power relations that shape what's happening. This step involves asking critical questions: Whose voices are shaping this decision? Who is missing? What are the patterns of exclusion, harm in this organisation?

Look at your data — who takes part, who drops out, who gets disciplined, who advances — to reveal structural patterns. Also look at informal dynamics: Who gets heard? Who carries emotional burden labour? Who is protected?

Mapping power helps us move beyond surface-level fixes to root-level change. It shows us that racism isn't just about attitudes — it's embedded in systems, policies, and ways of working.

3. Shift Power

Once the dynamics are visible, the next step is to ask what needs to change — and who should be leading that change. Racial Justice means designing responses that centre the experiences, leadership, and safety of racialised young people and staff. It means going beyond symbolic gestures to material shifts: in decision-making power, in resource allocation, in representation, in whose knowledge is valued.

Ask: How can we move from “including voices” to sharing power? What would a meaningful role for racialised people in this process look like? What support or safety needs to be in place for that to happen?

Shifting power is not always comfortable — it requires organisations and individuals to let go of control, to unlearn familiar habits, and to trust new ways of doing things. But it’s also where transformation becomes possible.

4. Stay with it

Racial Justice is not a single action or one-off initiative — it’s a long-term commitment to equity in every part of our practice. That means building habits, systems, and cultures that keep racial equity present over time.

Ask: How are we embedding this lens into how we recruit, how we plan, how we meet, how we reflect, how we hold each other accountable? Are there regular spaces for reflection, review, and learning? Are we creating the conditions for honesty, discomfort, and growth — or are we defaulting to ease and avoidance?

Staying with it means building equity into the culture of the organisation as an ongoing way of working, so that the work is not an add-on or a project with a deadline.

6.3 The six steps to creating change: a Kingian framework for youth work practice

The philosophy of Kingian Nonviolence is essential to imagining what we are working toward. Rooted in the work of Martin Luther King Jr. and the many civil rights movements around the world that followed, this approach offers both a moral compass and a set of strategic tools for creating justice-based change.

Importantly, traditions of organised nonviolent resistance are not unique to North America. The civil rights movement in Northern Ireland drew on similar principles in its challenge to sectarianism, discrimination and unequal access to housing, voting rights and employment. While the

context was different, it reminds us that nonviolence has long been used as a strategy for confronting deeply embedded racial injustice closer to home, and that there is much to learn from communities who have lived with the consequences of division and conflict over generations.

These six steps are often described as part of a nonviolent campaign strategy, but they can also be used to guide programmes, interventions, projects, or everyday acts of resistance and care in youth work settings. We have adapted them here in the context of Irish youth work, recognising that:

- The steps are not necessarily linear. They are better understood as phases or dimensions of action.
- Each step overlaps with and informs the others.
- All six require a capacity to: connect the various things at play, perceive emotions, and have a commitment to justice.

Step 1: **Gather information**	Step 2: **Education**	Step 3: **Personal Commitment**
Step 4: **Negotiation**	Step 5: **Direct Action**	Step 6: **Reconciliation**

Step 1: Gather information

Creating change begins with listening, learning, and paying close attention to the conditions affecting young people and their communities. In addition to collecting data, it is about making visible what is often hidden: patterns of exclusion, histories of harm, systems of privilege, and stories of resistance.

In youth work, this means:

- Talk with young people about their lived experience.

- Observe who is included or excluded from opportunities.
- Map power: Who decides what? Who gets heard? Who is missing?
- Use tools like the Four Step Tool for Racial Justice (Racial Justice Lens), the Four Dimensions of Racism (Quadrant), or the Pyramid of Hate to deepen your understanding.

Example: A youth service notices that Black and Traveller young people rarely attend leadership programmes. Staff use demographic data, conversations with young people, and community partners to explore why. They begin to see barriers in how the programmes are framed, staffed, and promoted.

Step 2: Education

Once the context is understood, the next step is to make meaning together. Education can be about sharing facts but it's also about building critical consciousness, leadership, and solidarity. It includes self-education, peer learning, youth-led workshops, and mentoring.

In youth work, this means:

- Build your own capacity to speak clearly about race, justice, and power.
- Support young people to connect their experiences to wider systems.
- Make space for the youth voice, not as a token exercise, but as an essential part of analysis and leadership.
- Connect your learning to youth work values: equity, dignity, inclusion.

Example: After realising that migrant young people in the area are routinely targeted by security personnel in local shops, a group of young people create an art project about racial profiling, linking their stories to wider patterns in Irish society. Staff support them with historical context and strategy planning.

Step 3: Personal commitment

Creating change starts with ourselves. This step is about naming your own relationship to the issue, your sphere of influence, and the power you hold. It asks you to reflect: **Where are you in this story? What choices are available to you? What are you avoiding?**

In youth work, this means:

- Engage in reflective practice: Where am I reinforcing the status quo?
- Identify your "choice points" i.e. moments where you could act differently.
- Be honest about your fears, blind spots, and inherited biases.
- Make long-term, not just reactive, commitments.

Example: A white settled youth worker realises she's been avoiding conversations about racism with white settled young people in her group. Her external supervisor reflects back to her that her commitment is to challenge her practice: after supervision she begins integrating discussions of power and privilege into regular group activities and explores her own discomfort more deeply.

Step 4: Negotiation

Negotiation is about trying to resolve conflict or push for change through dialogue, influence, and advocacy. It's not always possible but it's a key step before contemplating direct action. In youth work, this often means advocating with schools, statutory bodies, or local governments on behalf of young people.

In youth work, this means:

- Build relationships with power-holders (schools, local authorities, funders, etc.).
- Use the Racial Justice lens to name what's at stake in policies or decisions.
- Negotiate the terms of a partnership, don't accept unequal dynamics.

- Engage young people with how to advocate for themselves with support.

Example: After several complaints from young people, a youth service negotiates with a local Garda station about discriminatory stop-and-search practices. The youth worker ensures racialised young people's concerns are represented and seeks accountability mechanisms going forward.

Step 5: Direct action

Direct action occurs when negotiation fails, or when urgency demands visible action. It can look like protest but also like storytelling, art, disruption, walkouts, digital media, or healing circles. The goal is to raise awareness, create pressure, and assert the dignity of those harmed.

In youth work, this means:

- Support young people to design safe and strategic actions.
- Help them assess risks, visibility, and support systems.
- Frame action not as rebellion, but as participation in public life.

Example: A youth group organises a public installation in their area about racism using hard hitting imagery. The action garners local media attention with the aim to shift public conversation.

Step 6: Reconciliation

Reconciliation is about what happens after the change, or after the harm has been named. It does not mean pretending the conflict didn't happen. It means repair, healing, and new agreements about how we move forward.

In youth work, this means:

- Facilitate processes of accountability and repair after harm.
- Support young people to reflect on what justice feels like to them.
- Explore how relationships with power holders might evolve post-conflict.

- Recognise when reconciliation isn't possible but still hold on to the value or reconciliation.

Example: After a racist incident at a youth club, a restorative process is created for healing including a circle process, apology, group reflection, and agreements about future norms. The harmed young person is given choice and leadership in shaping the outcome.

These six steps can be used to guide everything from peer conflict-resolution to large-scale campaigns, from team culture to public advocacy.

Key takeaways

- Youth workers are change agents within their organisations and communities.
- Change is a process that moves from self-reflection to collective action.
- Discomfort is not a barrier but part of meaningful learning and growth.
- Equity requires responding differently to different needs.
- Racial Justice is an ongoing commitment, not a one-time achievement.

Reflective questions

- How do I prioritise learning over being "right" in difficult conversations?
- How do I create brave spaces while maintaining safety for racialised young people?
- What concrete actions can I take to redistribute power and resources?
- Who am I accountable to in this work, and how do I receive feedback?

In conclusion: Committing to Racial Justice in Youth Work

Role of youth work in Racial Justice

In this resource, we have offered a framework for developing inclusive, equitable, and racially-just youth work practice. Central to a Racial Justice approach is a commitment to the values of inclusion, anti-racism, and social justice. This commitment invites us to reflect deeply on our roles as youth workers, to understand the broader forces that shape young people's lives, and to engage in intentional, transformative practice.

Real change can happen if we look at our work through a Racial Justice lens and align this with the prism of social justice which involves removing barriers to access, equity, rights, participation, and it prioritises the inclusion and active participation of racialised communities.

Role of policy in Racial Justice

Supporting this work at a policy level is the National Action Plan Against Racism (NAPAR), 2023-2027 in which youth work is named. For NAPAR to have a real impact, the youth sector has a significant role to play. The key to tackling racism is making sure that Racial Justice is woven into every part of our organisations. This means including it in our mission statements and visions, and across all levels of our work – in our projects, programmes, policies, practice, advocacy, research, and communications. It also means bringing integrity and accountability to our partnerships, collaborations, and our leadership role in our communities.

NYCI's vision for Racial Justice

The National Youth Council of Ireland's vision is an Ireland where young people in every community are empowered by excellent youth work to reach their full potential and actively participate in an inclusive society. We want all young people to be empowered and to belong in a fair and just society. This means committing to social justice and equity, recognising that our lives are connected, and building solidarity by working together. We deeply value diversity. As the collective voice of the youth work sector, NYCI builds capacity and provides leadership to achieve better outcomes for all young people.

Our commitment to advancing Racial Justice begins with consciousness of our personal privilege. Most of us are white, cis gendered, straight, middle class, and settled – although predominantly female. We are aware that these privileges have helped us to attain roles that bring us into spheres of influence. We have made a commitment to be a learning organisation, and to put dignity at work first. For that to happen, it is important that we all become as comfortable as possible with discomfort, so we can continue to learn and grow, and bring others on that learning and growing journey.

Like others in the youth work sector, we struggle to get secure funding for this work. But with the resources we have, we prioritise working and collaborating with people of colour, consistently finding ways together to build and amplify their realm of influence and for them to be respected as thought leaders. We actively encourage and enable people of colour to join our staff teams whenever opportunities arise. We also proactively create opportunities for growth and development of younger or less experienced people of colour with initiatives that are led by other people of colour.

We believe strongly in the power of language and its ability to reshape our reality. When we speak up, we make a difference. Core to our work is building others' confidence around using the language of inclusion and justice.

We are guided and held accountable by young people, especially minority ethnic young people who shared their stories with us at numerous youth

consultations and when we did the research for our report, *Make Minority a Priority*. We carry those young people's voices in our heads and our hearts, and we seek to amplify them at every opportunity.

We all bring our own personalities and strengths to Racial Justice work - we all find our own way to make a difference. We each have a role in looking for ways to rebalance power and to create paths to justice, including healing justice for those impacted by racism. That doesn't always mean standing down or standing aside to ensure people of colour are front and centre; it also means standing up and standing with.

Thank you for engaging with this resource. We hope it strengthens and supports your commitment to building youth work rooted in Racial Justice, solidarity, and collective care. We welcome your reflections, questions, and feedback, and look forward to continuing this journey with you.

Annexe

NYCI's Global Youth Work (GYW) Programme has, over several years, been intentionally deepening its engagement with Racial Justice as a core element of youth work practice. The following are examples of how it is working toward this.

Global Youth Work and Development Education Certificate: A Racial Justice–informed practice

NYCI's Global Youth Work (GYW) Programme's commitment to engaging with Racial Justice is embedding in into the NUI Certificate in Global Youth Work and Development Education (Level 8), which provides youth workers with an opportunity to critically reflect on their practice and to develop approaches that respond to racial injustice, inequality and interconnected global and local crises.

Delivered over an eight-month period in a blended online and in-person format, the Certificate brings together youth workers who are already asking difficult questions of themselves, their organisations and the wider systems they operate within. Participants are supported to engage with social, ecological and political challenges with maturity, responsibility and care, recognising youth work as a space where critical consciousness, solidarity and action can be nurtured.

The programme is grounded in an understanding that 'race' is not a biological fact but a social construct that emerged through colonialism as a way of organising power, privilege and exclusion. From this starting point, the Certificate invites participants to examine how colonial histories and racialised systems continue to influence youth work practice, institutions and everyday interactions with young people.

One of the most significant impacts of racism is its effect on imagination: on what we come to see as possible, normal or inevitable. Drawing on Indigenous, Black and decolonial scholarship and practice, the programme creates space for participants to question dominant ways of knowing and being. This includes engaging with ideas of "decolonising the mind" and recognising imagination as a practical resource for change, not an abstract exercise. Youth workers are encouraged to explore how their

own thinking has been shaped by particular histories, narratives and social locations, and how this influences their work with young people.

Learning takes place collectively, recognising that knowledge is built through dialogue, reflection and shared experience. The Certificate provides a supported environment where practitioners can explore uncertainty, discomfort and contradiction, while remaining accountable to the impact of racism on young people and communities.

Three interlinked areas of focus underpin the programme.

First, an anti-oppressive approach to youth work practice. Participants are supported to reflect on identity, positionality and power, and to understand how personal change is inseparable from practice change. Youth workers are encouraged to see themselves as instruments of change, recognising that their assumptions, behaviours and responses shape the outcomes experienced by young people.

Second, a strong emphasis on understanding racism and other forms of oppression as systemic rather than solely interpersonal. The programme supports youth workers to move beyond individualised explanations of harm and to analyse how structures, institutions and historical legacies shape inequality locally and globally. This systemic lens is essential for developing responses that avoids unintentionally reproducing harm.

Third, the programme adopts an embodied and relational approach to learning. In a context where disconnection from self, others and the natural world is increasingly evident, participants are invited to reconnect through reflective, relational and practice-based methodologies. Drawing from Indigenous wisdom and globally located practitioners, the programme values ways of learning that are grounded, experiential and attentive to emotional and relational dimensions of change.

Feedback from previous participants highlights increased confidence in practice, a deeper connection between theory and lived experience, and a renewed commitment to youth-led change. Many describe the Certificate as not simply as a course, but as a community of practice that supports ongoing learning, accountability and solidarity.

The Certificate is delivered through a partnership between NYCI's Youth 2030 Global Youth Work Programme and Maynooth University, with Trócaire and Concern Worldwide as part of the wider consortium. Together, this partnership reflects a shared commitment to youth work that is critically engaged, justice-oriented and responsive to the realities facing young people today.

Climate Justice through a Racial Justice lens:

Irish Travellers: A Climate Justice Approach

Nomadism has long been part of the living practice of some Indigenous peoples. Irish Travellers are an Indigenous minority ethnic group whose relationship with land has historically been shaped by movement rather than settlement. Mobility was not incidental but central to a way of life grounded in balance, care and sustainability. Through traditions of storytelling, craft and song, Travellers carried knowledge of land as a living entity that required movement to remain healthy. Staying in one place for too long was understood as harmful, both to the land and to community wellbeing.

This worldview sits in tension with dominant models of development shaped by colonialism and modernity. Colonial systems promoted a narrow story of "progress", rooted in settlement, ownership, extraction and economic growth. Human development came to be measured through productivity, accumulation and individual achievement, often at the expense of ecological balance, collective care and community connection. While modernity has brought material benefits for some, these benefits have been unevenly distributed and frequently rely on the exploitation of land, labour and people.

The legacies of colonialism remain deeply embedded in the present. One of their most enduring impacts is separation: between people and the natural world, between individuals and community, and between groups of people through hierarchies of worth. The invention of 'race' was central to this process, enabling power to be organised around who was seen as normal, productive and deserving, and who was not. Those who did not fit the dominant story of progress were excluded, dehumanised or targeted for assimilation. Racism became a key mechanism through which access to power, opportunity and dignity was controlled.

Irish Travellers were positioned outside this dominant narrative. For generations, state policies sought to forcibly settle Traveller communities and dismantle their nomadic way of life. These policies were often framed as “improvement” or “integration”, but in practice they operated as forms of cultural violence and systemic racism. Traveller identity, knowledge and ways of living were treated as problems to be solved rather than sources of value.

The impacts of this history are ongoing. Irish Travellers experience persistent discrimination across education, employment, accommodation and healthcare. Suicide rates within the Traveller community are significantly higher than among the settled population, driven by experiences of racism, exclusion and deprivation. These outcomes are not individual or cultural failings; they are the result of long-standing structural harm.

There is also a clear environmental dimension to this injustice. Traveller communities have frequently been forcibly settled in hazardous or unsuitable locations, often near major roads, industrial sites or polluted land. Many families experience severe energy poverty, living in overcrowded or inadequate housing and relying on polluting fuel sources such as diesel generators. The shift from living in a mobile and harmonious relationship with the land to living with some of the poorest environmental conditions in the country is not accidental. It reflects policy decisions shaped by racism and disregard for Travellers.

Climate justice requires us to recognise that environmental harm and social harm are deeply connected. Marginalised communities are more exposed to risks such as pollution, flooding, rising energy costs and poor housing, while being least likely to benefit from climate funding or decision-making. Without a Racial Justice lens, climate action risks reproducing inequality rather than repairing it.

For youth work, this means starting from lived experience. Young people do not encounter climate change in the abstract. Some carry anxiety about environmental collapse, while others are navigating racism, poverty or exclusion that makes climate action feel distant or inaccessible. A justice-

based approach recognises these different realities and resists one-size-fits-all narratives.

Engaging with Traveller history and knowledge invites deeper reflection on whose voices are valued in climate conversations, how racism shapes environmental outcomes, and what fair, inclusive and community-led climate action in Ireland might look like. It offers a more honest foundation for change, grounded in responsibility, repair and relationship.

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Glossary of terms

Race: A social and political idea created during European colonialism to rank groups as superior or inferior. It has no biological basis but still shapes access to safety, opportunity, and belonging.

Racialisation: The process of assigning meaning or value to people based on perceived difference. It is reinforced through laws, institutions, media, and everyday behaviour, and changes over time.

Whiteness: A cultural and structural system that centres white people, especially those of European descent, as the norm. It shapes what society treats as "neutral" or "professional" and grants unearned advantages.

Skin Privilege: The advantage some people experience because they have lighter skin, even if they still face exclusion or racism in other ways.

Intersectionality: How different forms of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, homophobia) overlap in people's lives, shaping their experiences of harm.

Racism: A system of power that treats people unfairly or denies access to rights and opportunities based on perceived 'race' or background. It appears in behaviour, policies, institutions, and culture, and does not need to be intentional to cause harm.

White Supremacy: A belief system that views whiteness as superior. It shaped colonisation, slavery, and empire, and still influences who is seen as credible, safe, or worthy today.

Anti-Racism: Identifying, challenging, and dismantling racism in all its forms. A corrective practice that intervenes when harm happens.

Racial Justice: An approach that not only challenges racism but builds systems rooted in dignity, equity, and accountability. It focuses on creating what is needed for long-term fairness.

Racial Discrimination: Unfair or unequal treatment based on racial, ethnic, national, or cultural background. It becomes institutional racism when embedded in organisational practices.

Stereotyping: Repeating fixed or incorrect ideas about a group. Stereotypes — even "positive" ones — ignore individuality and contribute to exclusion or pressure.

Unconscious Bias: Automatic judgments shaped by stereotypes absorbed from society. Bias can still cause harm even when unintentional.

Microaggressions: Small comments or actions that express prejudice or reinforce exclusion. Their cumulative effect can leave young people feeling unsafe or "othered."

Hate Speech: Expression that spreads or encourages hatred, stereotypes, or discrimination based on identity. Racist hate speech targets people based on real or perceived racial, ethnic, cultural, national, or religious background.

Hate Crime: A criminal act — such as assault or property damage — motivated partly or wholly by bias against someone's identity.

Acts of Bias: Everyday comments, jokes, or stereotypes that normalise harmful ideas and create conditions for further harm.

Acts of Prejudice: Actions that express hostility, scapegoating, or ridicule, causing emotional and social harm.

Acts of Discrimination: Biased ideas embedded in institutions, policies, or services, leading to unequal treatment.

Acts of Violence: Physical attacks, threats, or targeted damage based on identity. Often fuelled by hate or misinformation.

Genocide: The intentional physical or cultural destruction of a people. Many young people carry the impact through family or community history.

Power: The ability to influence decisions, control resources, or shape environments. It operates across different levels.

Visible Power: Power found in laws, policies, or official decisions. These may appear neutral but often benefit the majority and disadvantage minority groups.

Hidden Power: Influence over what issues are discussed or ignored, often controlled through media, funding, or political influence.

Invisible Power: Norms and ideas that shape beliefs about identity, fairness, and inequality. It makes some forms of exclusion seem normal.

Power Over: Using power to control, exclude, or dominate others. Appears in discriminatory decisions or systems.

Power With: Power created collectively through solidarity and shared action.

Power To: A person's individual ability to act, decide, and create change.

Power Within: Inner confidence, values, and self-awareness that guide how a person shows up in the world.

Privilege: Unearned advantages linked to identity, such as race, class, religion, or citizenship. Privilege shapes how people are treated and what barriers they face. It often goes unnoticed by those who hold it.

Capitalism: An economic system built on inequality. Historically, racialised people have been exploited within it, and ideas about "merit" can hide how power and wealth are protected for some.

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