



Australian Government

Australian Public Service Commission

Cultural backgrounds in the Australian Public Service

Understanding our workforce

People Insights Branch

Research Note 08-23



Key findings

- A new APS Employee Census measure has enabled greater understanding of the ways in which APS employees' perceptions and experiences differed by cultural background.
- Employees with Australian and Anglo-European backgrounds more commonly worked in executive and senior executive level roles.
- Employees across all cultural backgrounds had high levels of employee engagement.
- A range of employee perceptions differed across cultural backgrounds. These included:
 - Satisfaction with health and wellbeing supports
 - Perceived workplace respect and inclusion
- Perceptions of discrimination, harassment and bullying varied substantially between cultural backgrounds.

In the 2023 APS Employee Census, APS employees were asked how they described their cultural backgrounds

For the first time in an APS Employee Census, APS employees were asked

“How would you describe your cultural background?”

Respondents were able to select multiple backgrounds from 14 different cultural/ethnic groups.

Cultural background is one of multiple possible indicators and sources of information with which to better understand the cultural and linguistic diversity of the APS workforce.

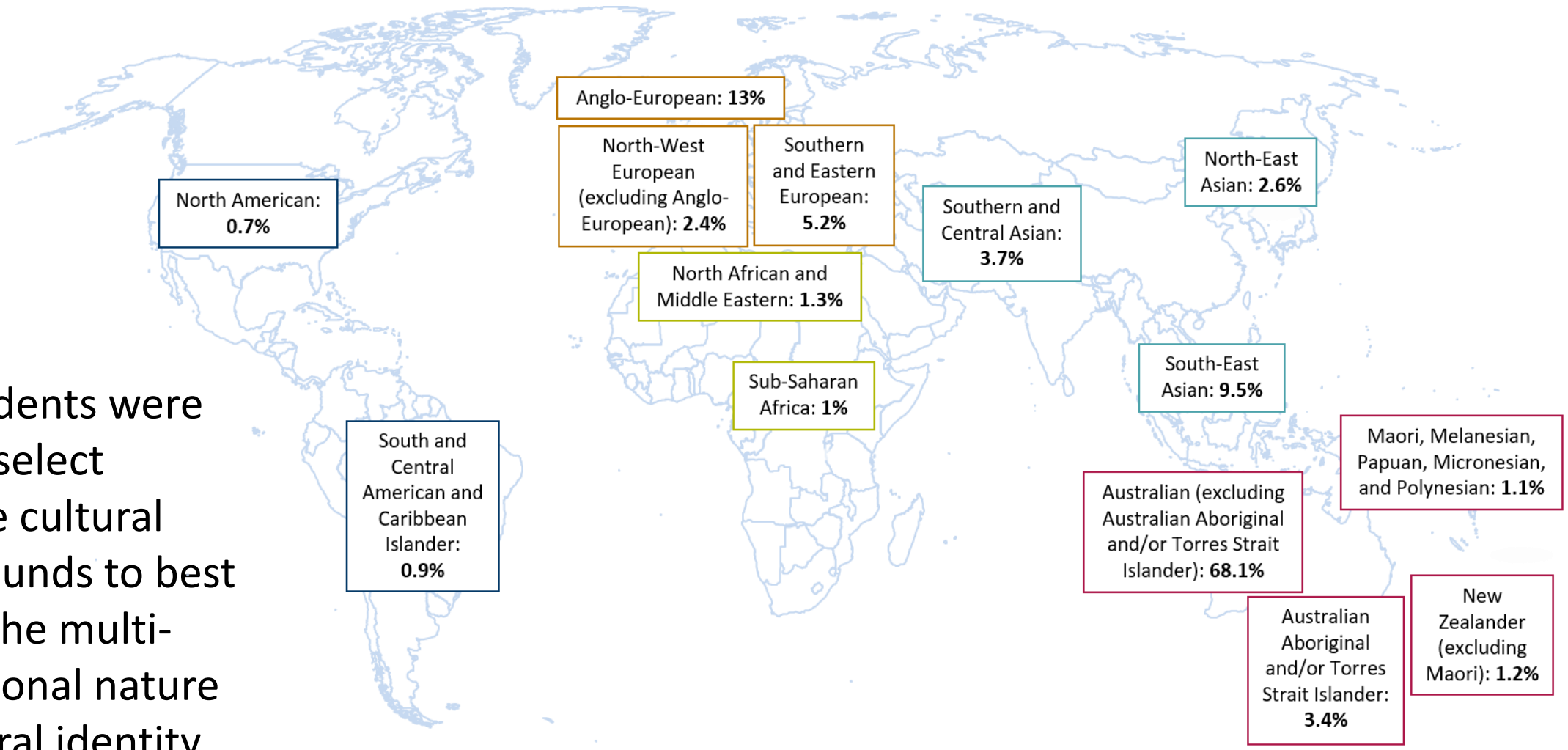
For the purposes of this question, cultural background was explained as:

Your cultural background is the cultural/ethnic group(s) to which you feel you belong or identify. This background may be the same as your parents, grandparents, or your heritage, or it may be the country you were born in or have spent a great amount of time in, or feel more closely tied to.

Diversity Council Australia/University of Sydney Business School (2021) *Counting Culture: Towards a Standardised Approach to Measuring and Reporting on Workforce Cultural Diversity in Australia*, Sydney, Diversity Council Australia.
https://www.dca.org.au/sites/default/files/dca_counting_culture_2021_synopsis_online_final.pdf

APS employees identify with a diverse range of cultural backgrounds

Respondents were able to select multiple cultural backgrounds to best reflect the multi-dimensional nature of cultural identity.

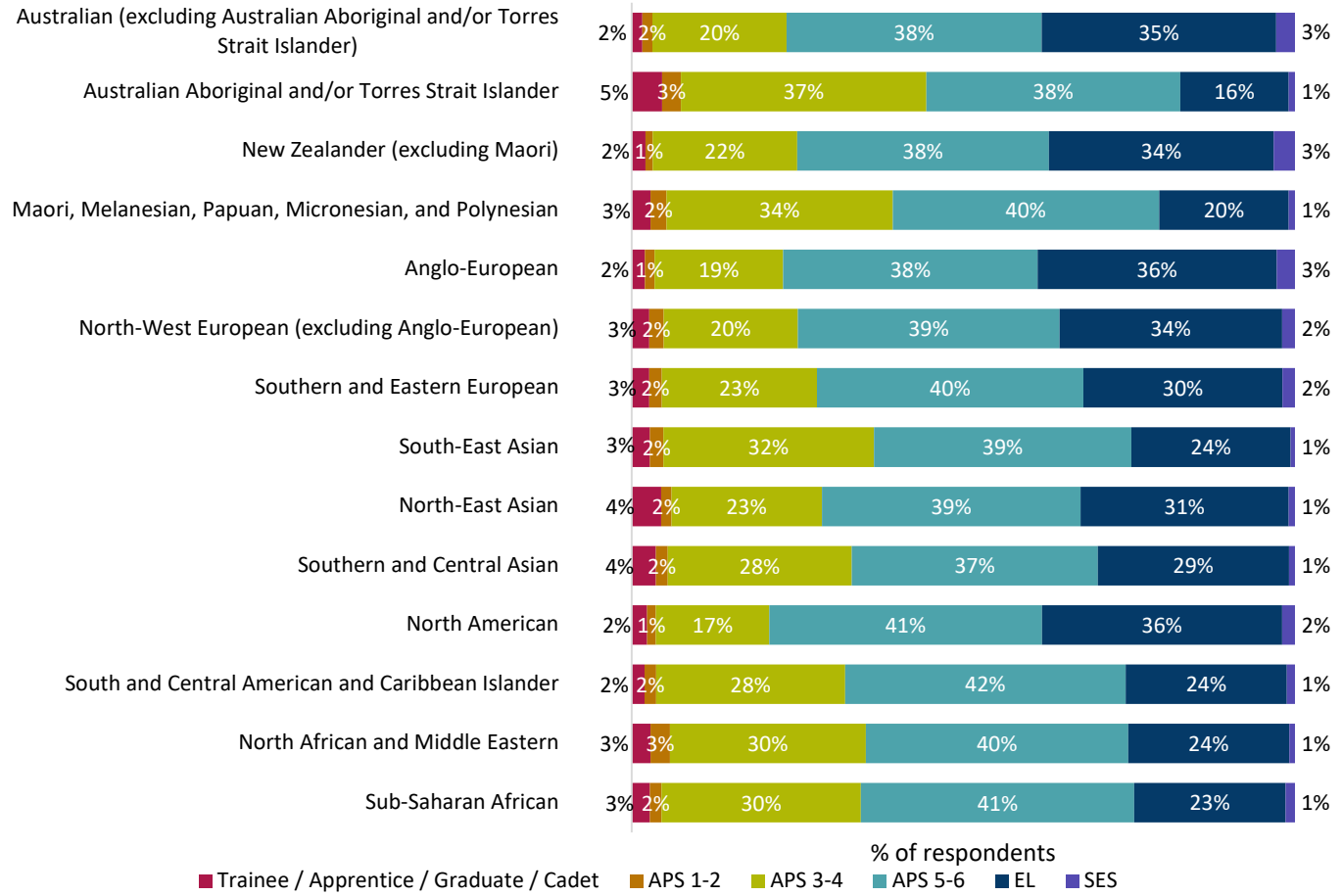


The proportion of APS employees in each classification differed between cultural backgrounds

Larger proportions of respondents from Anglo-European (36%), North American (36%) and Australian* (35%) backgrounds held Executive Level (EL) positions.

Similarly, larger proportions of respondents from Australian* (3%), New Zealander (3%) and Anglo-European (3%) backgrounds worked in Senior Executive Service (SES) roles.

Classification by cultural background



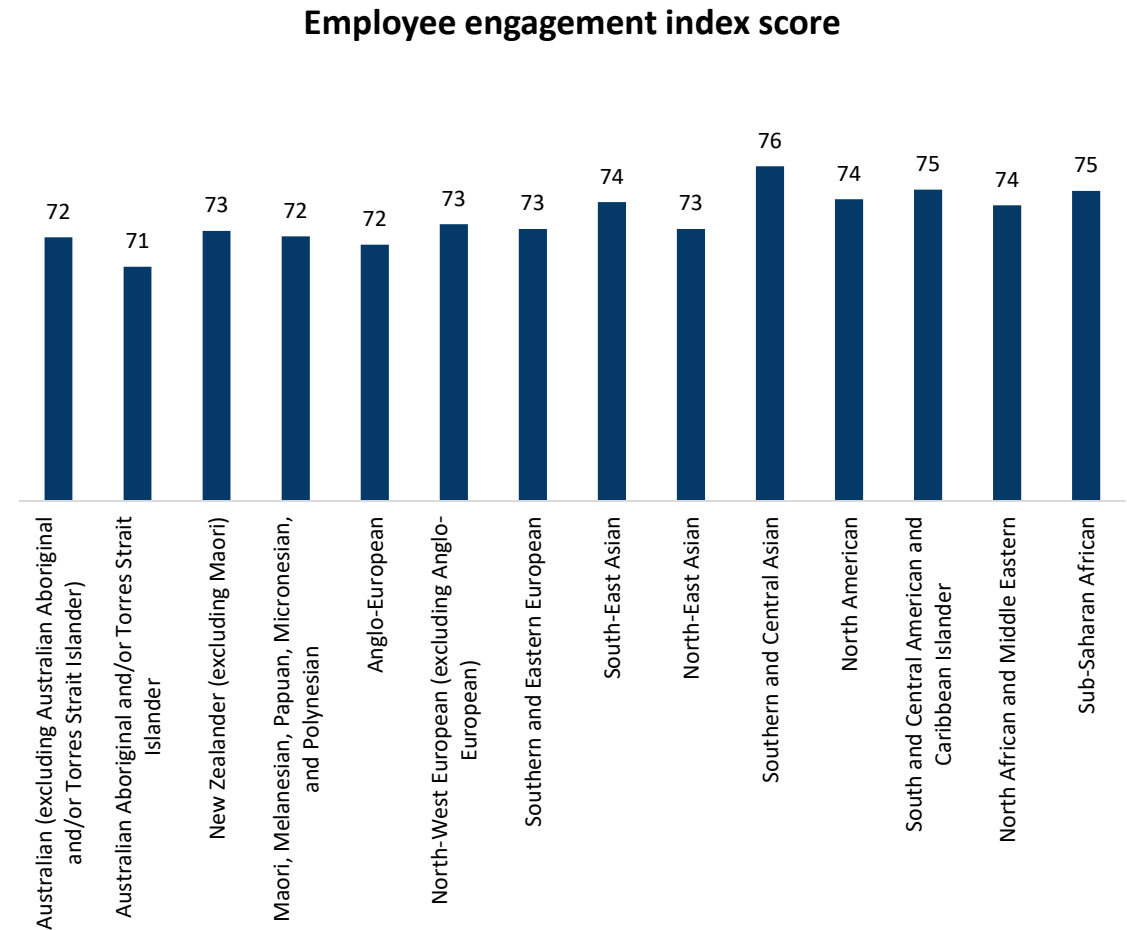
*Australian (excluding Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander)

Across all cultural backgrounds, APS employees had high levels of employee engagement

Employee engagement index scores reflect the degree to which respondents feel emotionally connected and committed to their organisation.

Respondents across all cultural backgrounds tended to report high levels of employee engagement.

However, these scores varied notably between 71 for respondents from Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds to 76 for respondents from Southern and Central Asian backgrounds.

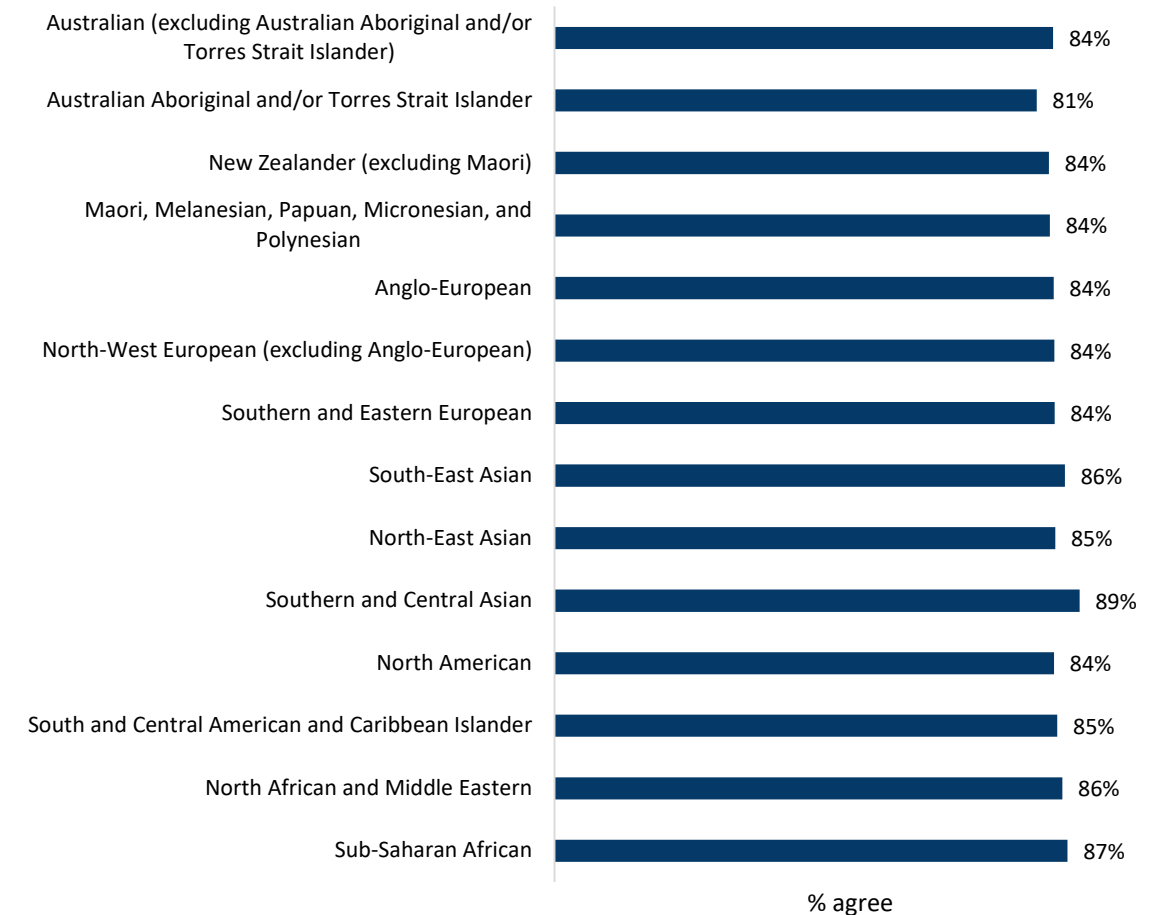


APS employees across all cultural backgrounds believed in the purpose and objectives of the APS

Respondents across all cultural backgrounds demonstrate strong belief in the purpose and objectives of the APS.

Respondents from Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds reported lower levels of agreement (81%), while respondents from Southern and Central Asian backgrounds reported the greatest agreement (89%).

I believe strongly in the purpose and objectives of the APS

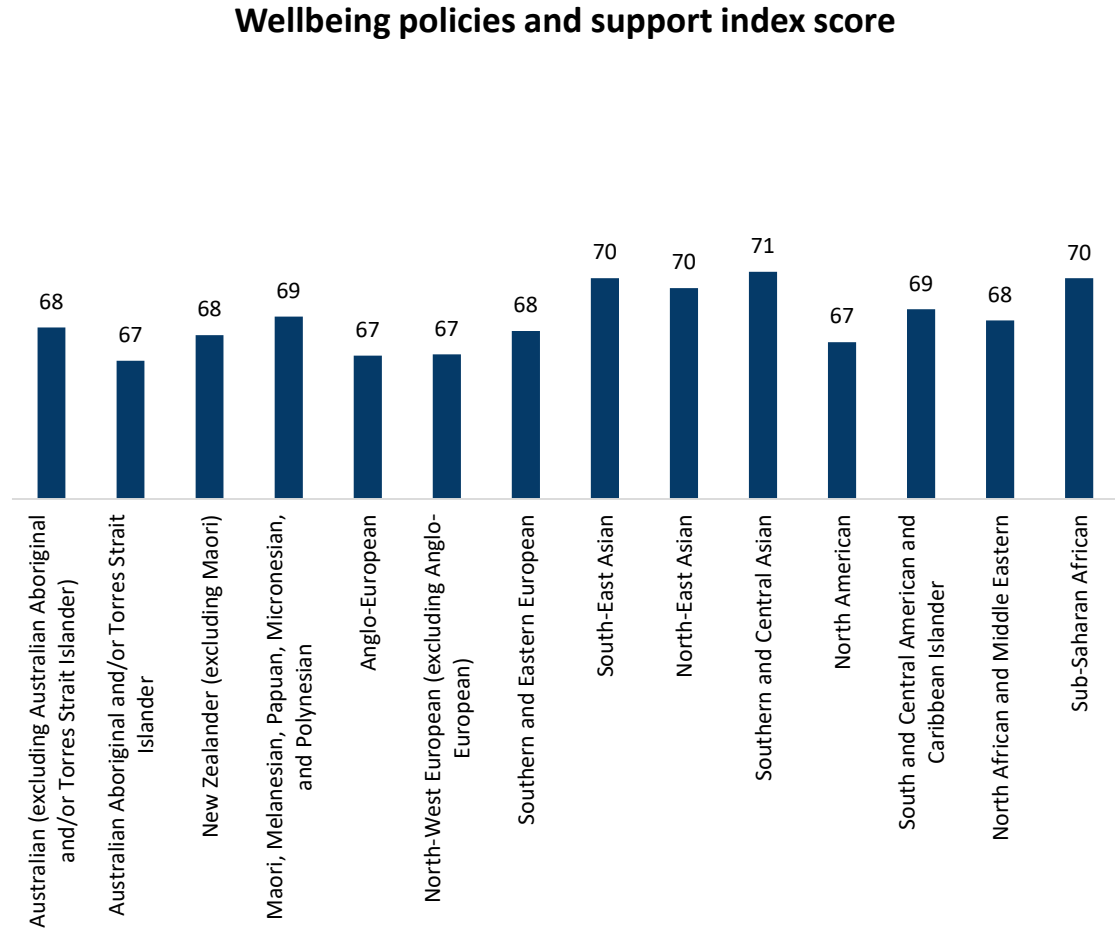


APS employees reported varying degrees of satisfaction with health and wellbeing supports across cultural backgrounds

Wellbeing policies and support index scores reflect the degree to which respondents feel their health and wellbeing is supported.

Respondents from Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (67), Anglo-European (67), North-West European (67), and North American (67) reported the lowest scores.

Respondents from Southern and Central Asian (71), South-East Asian (70), North-East Asian (70) and Sub-Saharan African (70) backgrounds reported the highest scores.

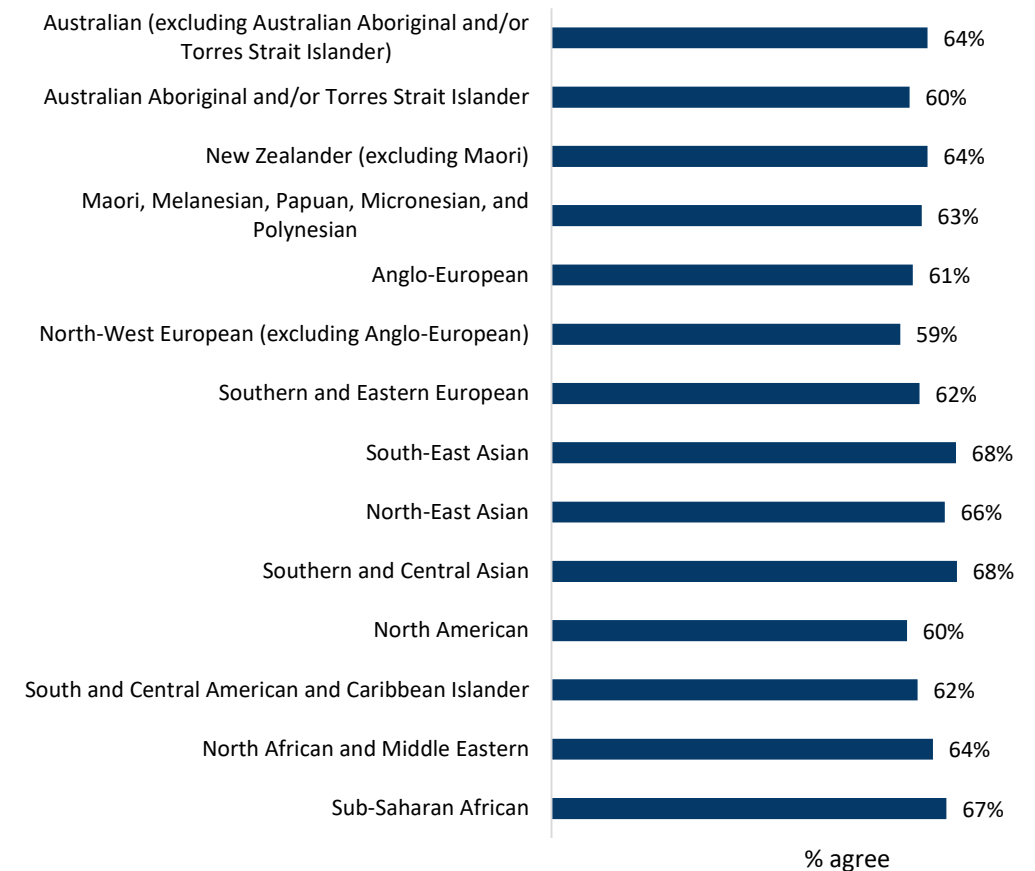


APS employees' satisfaction with wellbeing policies and practices differed across cultural backgrounds

Respondents from Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (60%), North American (60%), and North-West European (59%) backgrounds reported the lowest satisfaction with the policies and practices in place to help them manage their health and wellbeing.

Respondents from South-East Asian (68%), Southern and Central Asian (68%), and Sub-Saharan African (67%) backgrounds reported the highest satisfaction.

I am satisfied with the policies/practices in place to help me manage my health and wellbeing



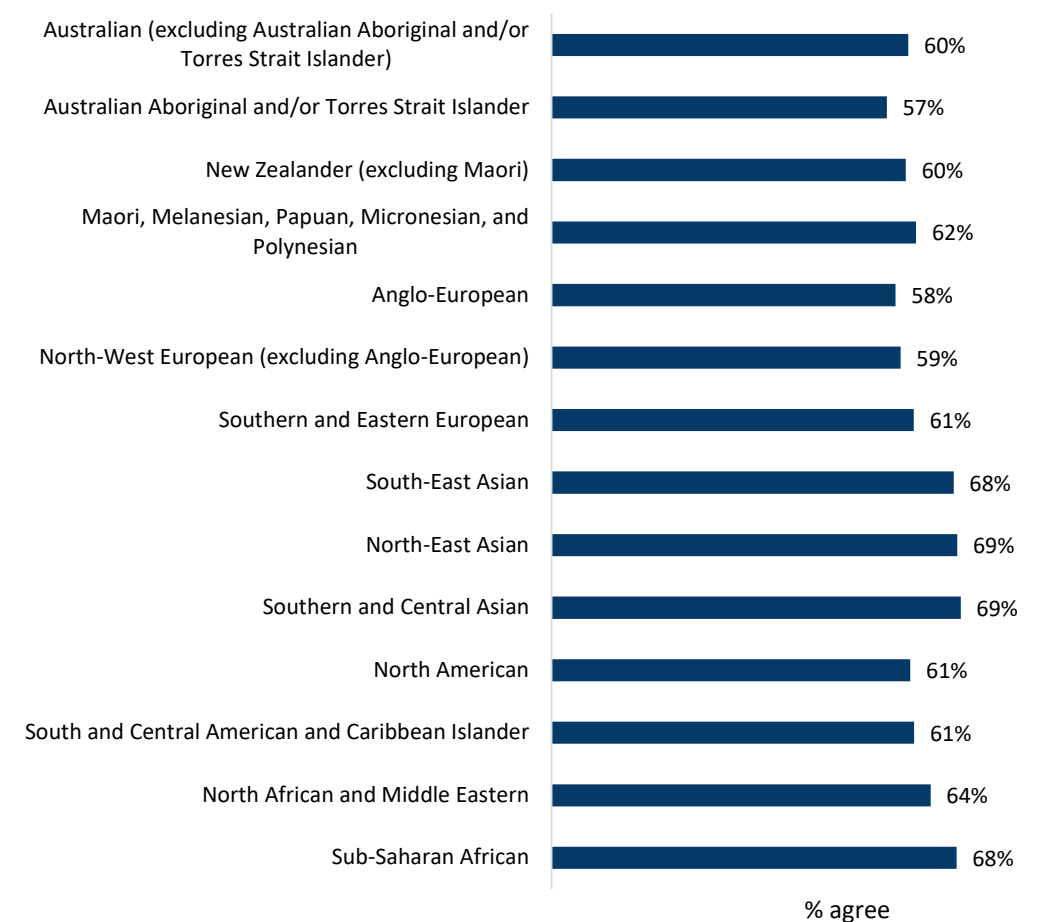
APS employees perceived large differences in their agency's care for their health and wellbeing across cultural backgrounds

The largest difference seen within the wellbeing policies and support index related to perceptions of agency's care for health and wellbeing.

Respondents from Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (57%) backgrounds reported the lowest agreement.

Respondents from North-East Asian (69%) and Southern and Central Asian (69%) backgrounds reported the highest agreement.

I think my agency cares about my health and wellbeing



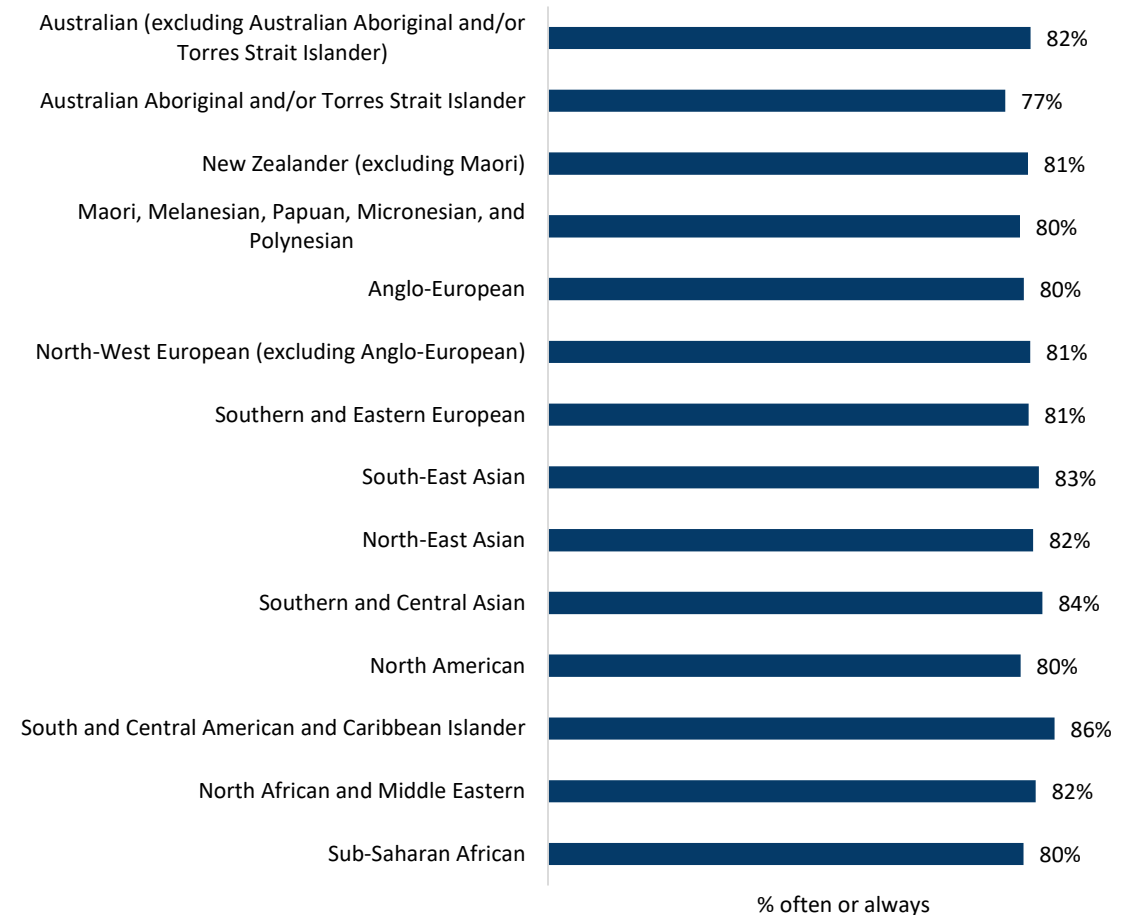
APS employees' perceptions of workplace respect differed across cultural backgrounds

Most respondents often or always perceived respect at work.

However, respondents from Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds perceived respect less often (77%) as compared to respondents of other cultural backgrounds.

Respondents from South and Central American and Caribbean Islander backgrounds perceived respect most often (86%).

I receive the respect I deserve from my colleagues at work

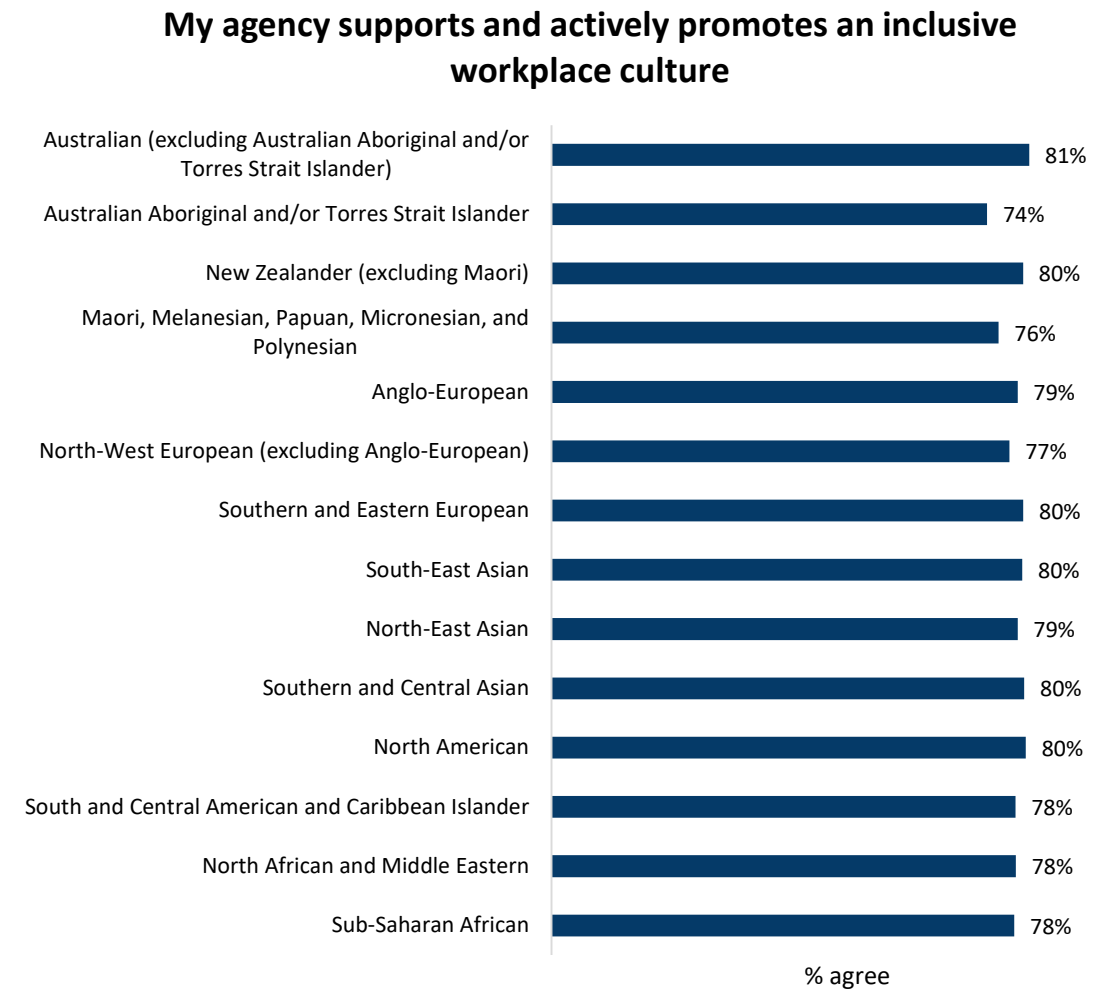


APS employees' perceptions of inclusion differed across cultural backgrounds

The majority of respondents agreed their agency supported and actively promoted an inclusive workplace culture.

Respondents from Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (74%) and Maori, Melanesian, Papuan, Micronesian, and Polynesian (76%) backgrounds reported the lowest agreement that their agency supported an inclusive culture.

Whereas respondents from Australian* backgrounds reported the greatest agreement (81%).



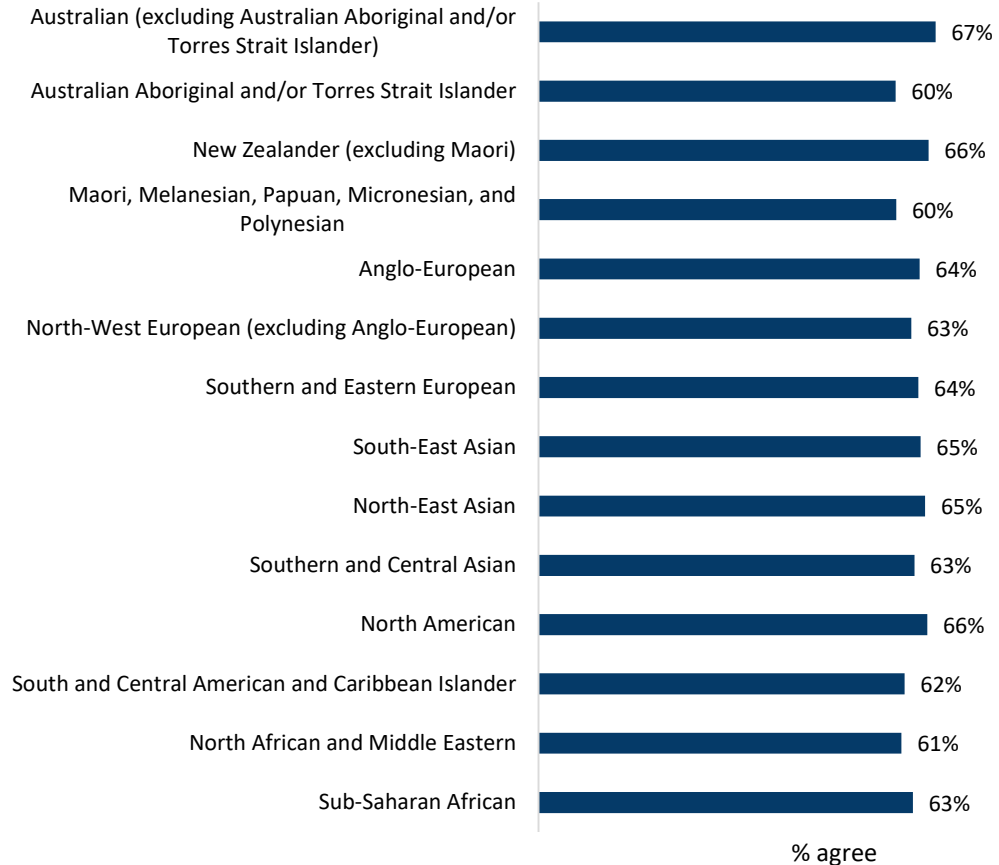
*Australian (excluding Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander)

APS employees perceived differences in opportunities across cultural backgrounds

Lower proportions of respondents from Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (60%) and Maori, Melanesian, Papuan, Micronesian and Polynesian (60%) backgrounds perceived they had the same opportunities as anyone else of their ability or experience.

In contrast, respondents from Australian* backgrounds (67%) had the greatest agreement.

I feel I have the same opportunities as anyone else of my ability or experience



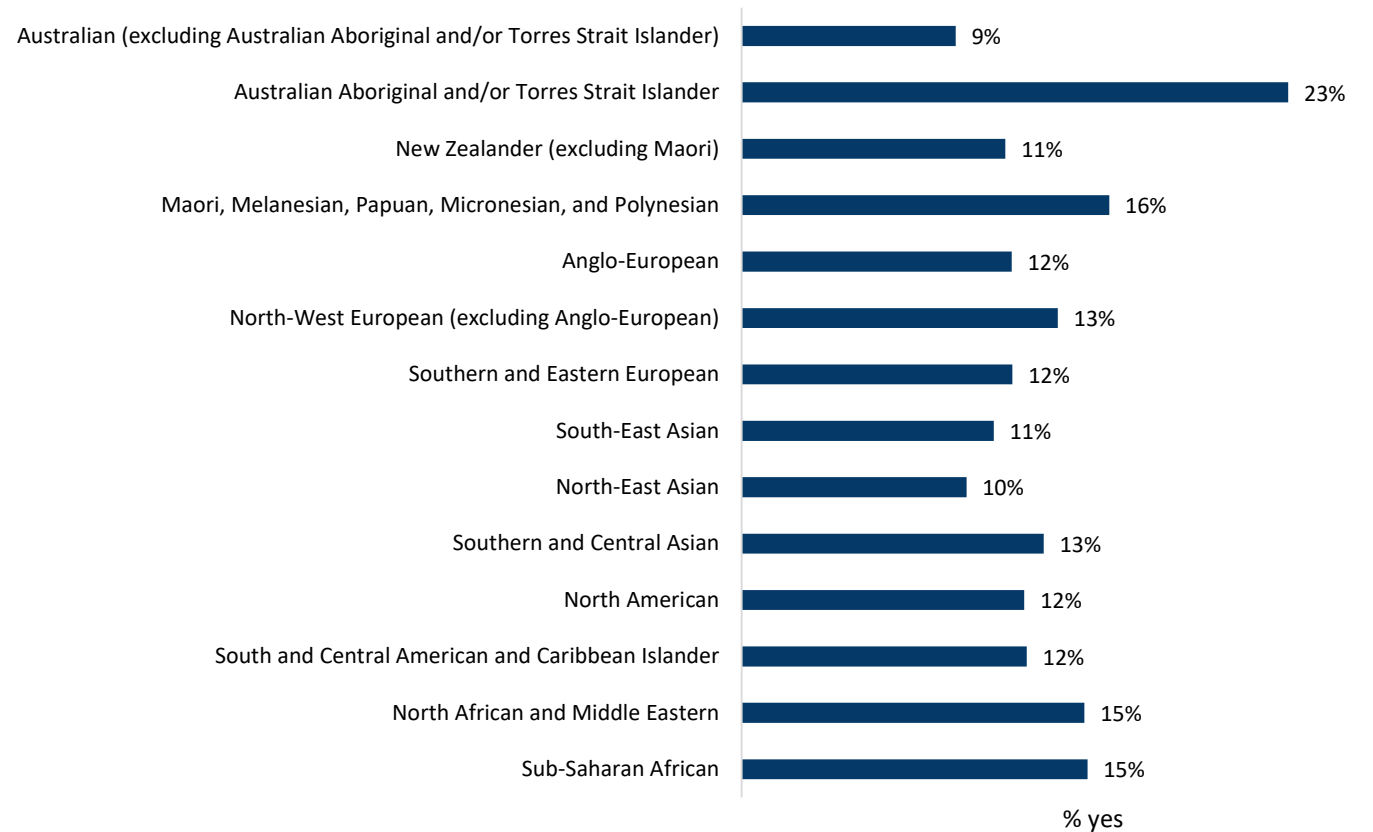
*Australian (excluding Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander)

Perceptions of discrimination differed substantially across cultural backgrounds

Perceptions of discrimination reported by respondents from Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds (23%) were markedly higher than all other cultural backgrounds.

Perceptions of discrimination were lowest for respondents from Australian* backgrounds (9%).

During the last 12 months and in the course of your employment, have you experienced discrimination on the basis of your background or a personal characteristic?



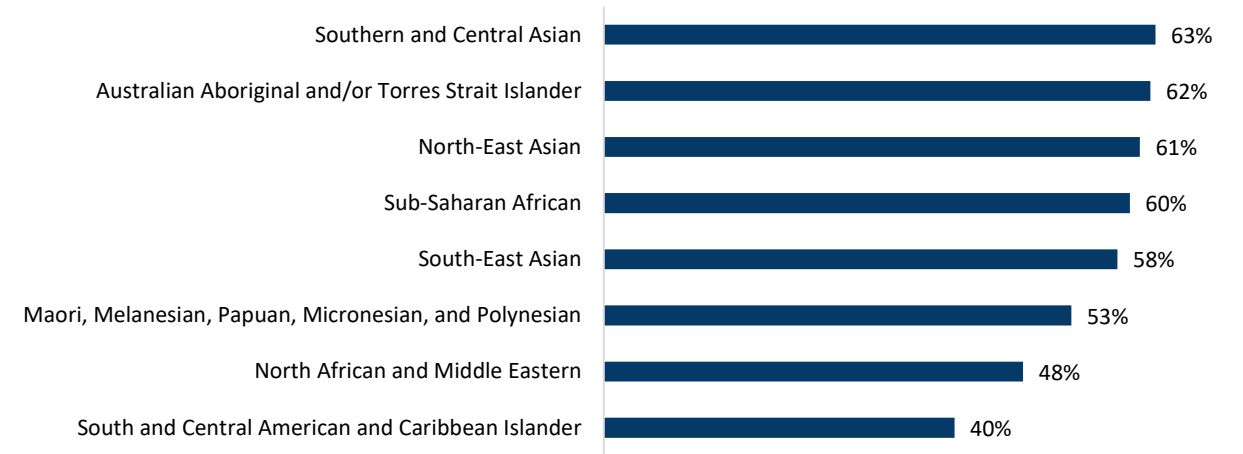
*Australian (excluding Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander)

The most common bases of discrimination were gender and race, although this varied across cultural backgrounds

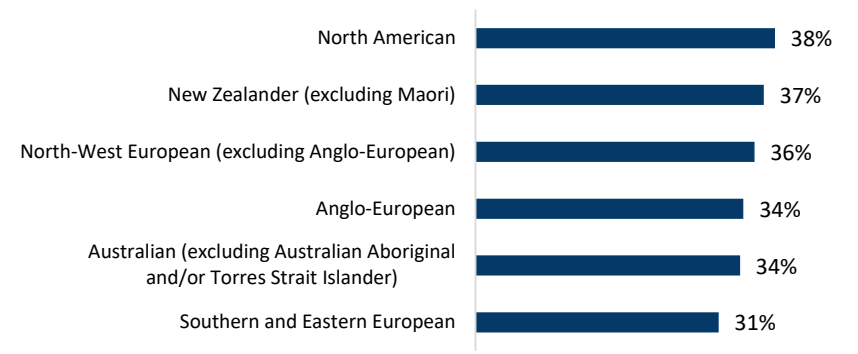
Of those who perceived discrimination, the basis of the discrimination experienced was most commonly identified as race by the majority of cultural backgrounds.

In contrast, respondents from all other cultural backgrounds most commonly identified gender.

Basis for discrimination: Race



Basis for discrimination: Gender



% of respondents who perceived discrimination

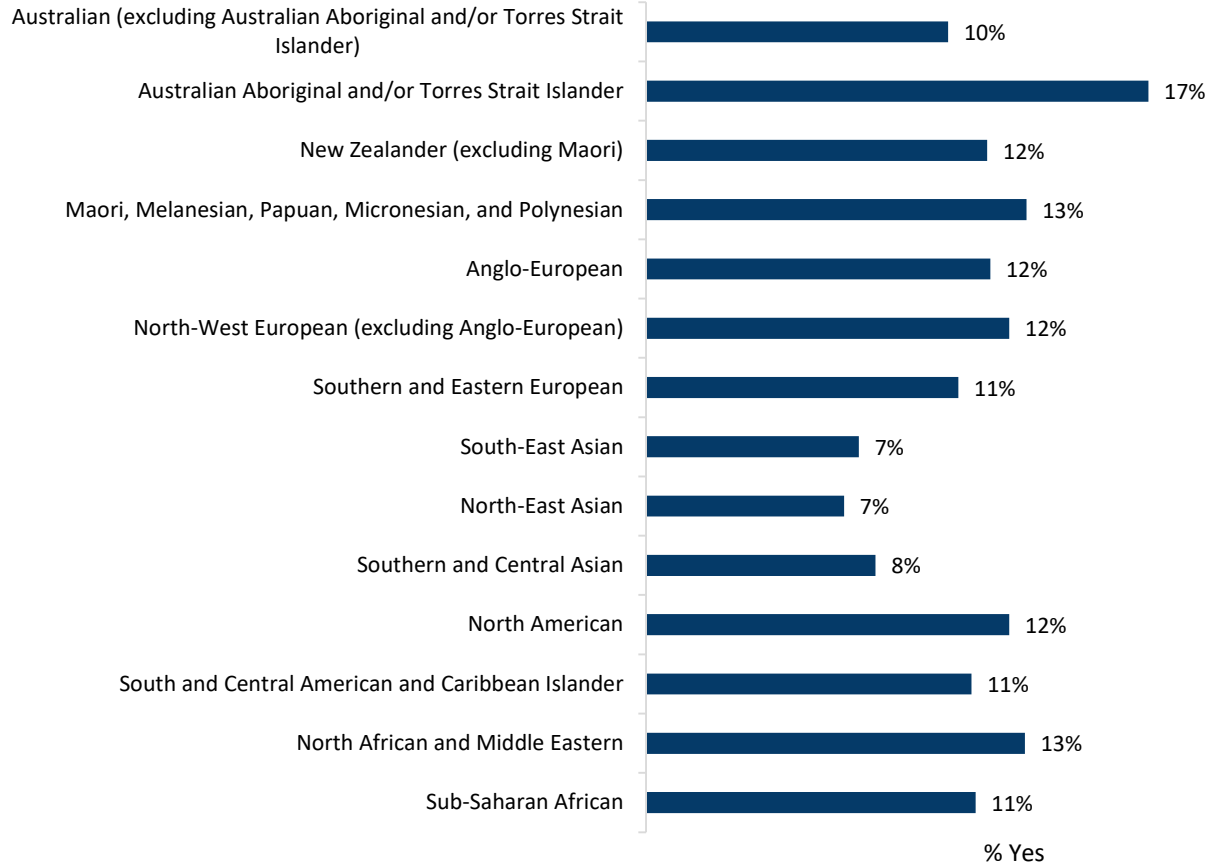
*Australian (excluding Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander)

Perceptions of harassment and bullying differed substantially across cultural backgrounds

Respondents from Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds reported the highest perceptions of harassment and/or bullying (17%).

Respondents from South-East Asian (7%) and North-East Asian (7%) backgrounds reported the lowest perceptions of harassment and/or bullying.

During the last 12 months, have you been subjected to harassment or bullying in your current workplace?

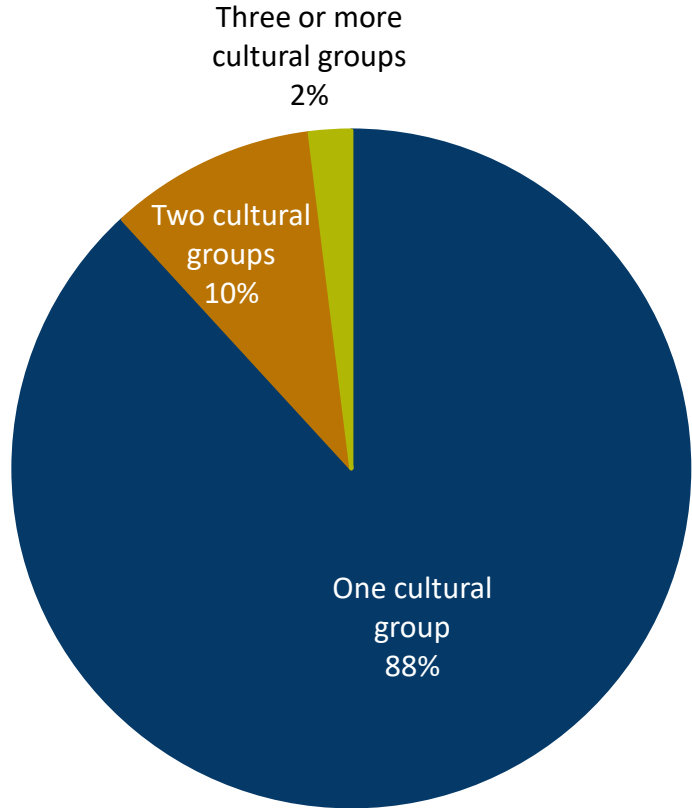


Many APS employees identified with multiple cultural groups, although the majority identified with one

Of the 14 different cultural groups that respondents were asked to select from, 88% of respondents indicated they belonged to one cultural group.

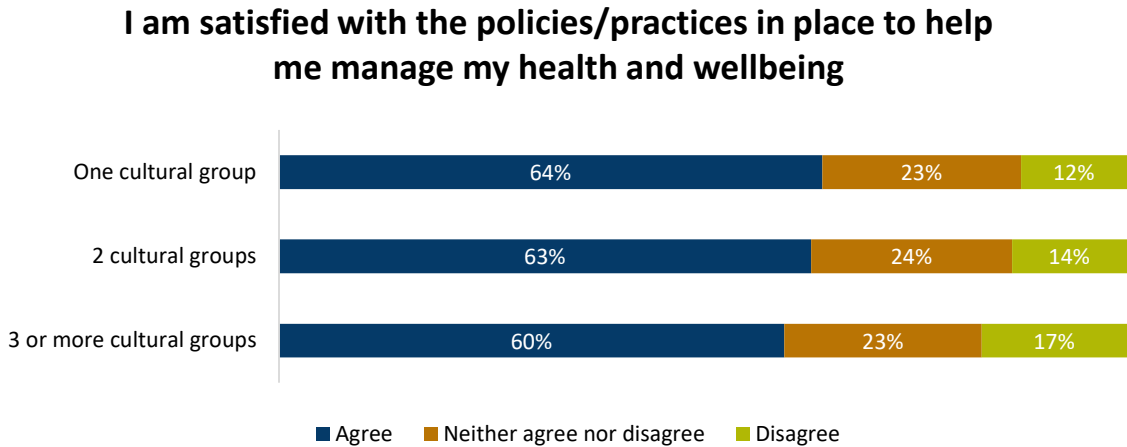
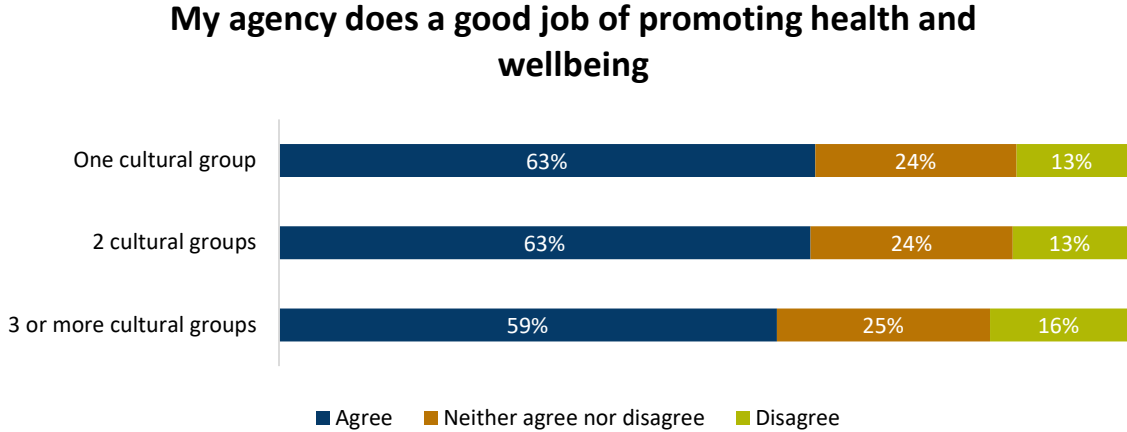
Ten per cent of respondents identified as belonging to two cultural groups and a further 2% with three or more.

Number of cultural groups identified by respondents



Employees who identified as belonging to 3 or more cultural groups had slightly lower perceptions of wellbeing promotion and support

Respondents who identified as belonging to 3 or more cultural groups reported slightly lower agreement that their agency did a good job of promoting health and wellbeing (59%) and that they were satisfied with the policies and practices to help them manage their health and wellbeing (60%).



Employees who identified with 3 or more cultural groups reported higher rates of discrimination and harassment and bullying

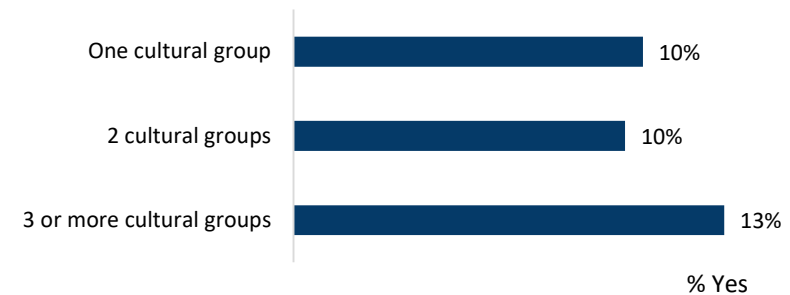
Respondents who identified as belonging to one or two cultural groups reported similar perceptions of discrimination and harassment and bullying.

Respondents who identified as belonging to three or more cultural groups reported higher perceptions of both discrimination (14%) and harassment and bullying (13%).

During the last 12 months and in the course of your employment, have you experienced discrimination on the basis of your background or a personal characteristic?



During the last 12 months, have you been subjected to harassment or bullying in your current workplace?



A new APS Employee Census measure is enabling the APS to better understand its workforce and respond to its diverse needs

The introduction of an APS Employee Census measure of cultural background has enabled a richer understanding of the cultural diversity within our workforce and the ways in which employees' experiences differ. Whilst the majority of APS employees describe their background as Australian, a large proportion identify with another culture and many identify with multiple cultures.

These results show our diverse workforce is highly engaged and believes strongly in the purpose and objectives of the APS. However, they also provide insight into areas of the APS that have much to gain from increased cultural diversity.

The data collected by the APS Employee Census cultural background measure are being used to inform the development of the APS CALD strategy and supporting work to increase cultural safety across the APS.

APS employees perceptions of respect, inclusion, opportunity and wellbeing differ across cultural backgrounds

The majority of employees feel the APS supports an inclusive workplace culture where people are treated with respect. However, there are differences in the perceptions that some employees by cultural background. Employees from some cultural backgrounds similarly perceive lower inclusivity, respect and opportunity.

Employees from a number of cultural backgrounds also perceive lower support and care for their wellbeing. Wellbeing is recognised as being positively associated with employee engagement, satisfaction and productivity¹. Given, wellbeing policies and practices are already in place across the APS, the targeted communication and promotion of existing wellbeing policies has the potential to rapidly benefit health and wellbeing perceptions.

¹ S Farley, D Mokhtar, K Ng and K Niven, 'What influences the relationship between workplace bullying and employee well-being? A systematic review of moderators,' *Work & Stress*, 2023, 24:1-28, doi:[10.1080/02678373.2023.2169968](https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2023.2169968).

Some employees perceive greater incidence of unacceptable behaviours

Employees from other cultural backgrounds showed greater perceptions of discrimination than those from Australian backgrounds. Of employees who perceived discrimination, they most commonly interpreted its base as due to gender or race. Similarly, perceptions of harassment and bullying vary widely between cultural backgrounds.

Specifically of note, Australian First Nations employees reported the most negative experiences across numerous measures, as well as the highest perceptions of discrimination and harassment and bullying.

Given employees from multiple cultures also report greater rates of unacceptable behaviours, these results suggest a need for targeted interventions to grow APS cultural capability, awareness and respect of differences to improve the work experiences, psychological and physical health¹ of APS employees.

1 S Farley, D Mokhtar, K Ng and K Niven, 'What influences the relationship between workplace bullying and employee well-being? A systematic review of moderators,' *Work & Stress*, 2023, 24:1-28, doi:[10.1080/02678373.2023.2169968](https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2023.2169968).

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This report focuses on cultural background and is one of several ways to explore the multi-dimensional nature of cultural and linguistic diversity.

It is acknowledged that respondents' interpretation of survey questions are influenced by many factors including cultural values, cognitive styles and frames of reference. The capture, analysis and interpretation of these results have been conducted through an Australian cultural lens, which may differ to that of some respondents.