



RESEARCH BRIEF

September 2025 | Publication: 6 | ISBN 978-1-0670195-5-6

Environmental Racialisation in inner city Auckland: Findings of a survey on participation and perceptions among ethnic migrants

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Executive Summary

This research brief summarises select key findings from the WERO Environmental Racism Project aimed at understanding the role of environmental inequality on ethnic migrant communities in Auckland.

Environmental racialisation refers to intentional or unintentional racial discrimination in environmental policymaking. One of the key consequences of environmental racialisation is denying affected communities the ability to participate in decision-making processes – or procedural justice – a key aspect of environmental justice. In this brief, we examine civic participation and community perceptions among Auckland's inner-city residents where over 60% of the population identify as 'ethnic' (non-Māori, non-Pasifika and non-Pākehā) (Stats NZ 2018). Survey data on demographic representation in decision-making, barriers to civic engagement, and community perceptions of neighbourhood quality and safety collected from 128 residents, as well as key informant interviews conducted in 2023, were analysed. The findings identify significant disparities in civic participation and safety perceptions across demographic groups, with potential implications for urban planning and community engagement in Auckland's increasingly diverse inner-city neighbourhoods.

Research undertaken within the WERO: Working to End Racial Oppression research programme has been developed in relation to the Takarangi framework. The Takarangi is a double spiral pattern prominent in Māori carving that is also depicted in the background of this brief. In WERO, the Takarangi framework has shaped our work on the values and ethics of all research that we undertake to address racism. Further information on the Takarangi is available online: <https://wero.ac.nz/research/takarangi-wero-values-and-roadmap/>

Key Insights

- Environmental racialisation excludes the voices of marginalised groups through inaccessible processes, tokenistic consultation, and the devaluation of their knowledge.
- Civic and community engagement is critical for addressing the negative perceptions of the City Centre and other neighbourhoods which in turn impacts on economic and social investment.
- Demographic makeup, aspects of the built environment (such as accessibility) and the social environment (e.g. perceptions of safety) of the City Centre shape the sense of influence that residents have over their neighbourhood. Among our key findings include that:
 - Women and established migrants are more likely to perceive themselves as being at risk in the City Centre compared to newer (recently arrived) migrants.
 - Respondents rank accessibility as the key positive factor influencing their decision to live in the City Centre.
 - Significant barriers to civic engagement exist in Auckland's inner city, with around 78% of residents reporting low involvement in neighbourhood decision-making processes.
- The findings also show that environmental and infrastructural concerns shape negative perceptions of the area, with 27% of respondents rating their neighbourhood as 'dirty' and 23% believing the area receives less financial support than other suburbs.
 - Polluted and poorly maintained areas can contribute to social stress, economic hardship, and weakened community cohesion, which may increase vulnerability to crime, while crime can further discourage investment and upkeep, creating a cycle of decline and insecurity.
- The perceived transience of ethnic migrant populations in the City Centre may influence stakeholder views of these areas as temporary spaces, potentially affecting how resources are allocated, and long-term planning decisions are made.

Introduction and Background: Environmental Racism and Racialisation

The *WERO Environmental Racism Project* provides one of the first broad-based research projects that examines environmental racism and racialisation in the Aotearoa (New Zealand) context. The study examines the existence and impact of environmental inequality on ethnic migrant communities and examines systemic ethnicity-based inequities in urban settings.

Environmental racism – the intentional acts of racial discrimination in environmental policy and decision-making – remains a pressing issue globally, manifesting in the unequal distribution of environmental risks and benefits among racial and ethnic diverse groups. Countries such as Canada attempt to combat environmental racism and the resulting environmental injustices by passing policies such as the National Strategy Respecting Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice Act (also known as the Private Member's Bill C-266). The Act requires the federal government to address longstanding issues of environmental racism and advance environmental justice nationally (Al Jazeera, 2024).

In Aotearoa, scholarship on environmental racism, along with concepts of environmental racialisation and environmental justice, is limited in comparison to the rest of the world. Early iterations of environmental racism/justice literature followed approaches similar to those of the US, focusing on air quality. However, recent iterations have focused heavily on Māori, entering the distinct realm of indigenous environmental justice. Nevertheless, studies have shown that Māori, Pasifika and other marginalised communities are more likely to be exposed to environmental risks (particularly poorer quality housing and higher levels of air pollutants) which leads to poorer health outcomes (Rout et al., 2020).

What is environmental racialisation?

Environmental racialisation is understood to be intentional or unintentional racial discrimination in environmental policymaking, particularly in the enforcement of regulations, laws, and targeting communities for the disposal of toxic waste and

siting of polluting industries (Teelucksingh, 2007). Unlike environmental racism, environmental racialisation emphasises unintentionality of racialised environmental consequences. Unintentionality arises from a range of sources. In part, it is the unintended outcome of historical, social and economic contexts that have had inequitable implications for marginalised groups.

Unintentionality is also derived from racialised meanings on a location (e.g. neighbourhood, city, etc), which can be both negative and positive. An example of the former would be referring to low income ethnic-concentrated (e.g., immigrant) communities as 'dirty', 'smelly', or 'unsafe' while affluent racialised communities (such as dominantly white or well-off immigrant neighbourhoods) being called 'safe', 'desirable', or 'clean' is an example of the latter. Environmental racialisation also recognises the relationship between the edification or stigmatisation of racialised communities based on their proximity to environmental benefits and harms (Bhardwaj, 2023; Choksey, 2021).

The distribution of environmental risks and/or burdens impact the stigmatisation of both places and people. For example, a neighbourhood with poor housing quality located near a waste site with little to no green spaces may have negative words associated with it (for example, dirty, ugly, poor). The people who reside in that place or neighbourhood are then associated with the negative words associated with that place (for example, they are dirty/ poor). International literature has found that the perception of a place impacts how people engage with that place and the people who reside there. For example, if a place is perceived as being unsafe, people may limit their engagement with the neighbourhood, leading to a loss in social and economic support (Shriver & Webb, 2009; Zhuang, 2016; Škobla & Filčák, 2024).

All these forms of environmental racialisation will impact those respective communities through disproportionate investment, development and social identity.

Environmental justice acts as the response or antithesis of environmental racism/inequality. It comprises subcategories of justice framing drawing on the works of environmental justice scholars such as David Scholsberg and Gordan

Walker, namely, Distributive, Recognition (justice as recognition), Capabilities (framework), and Procedural Justice (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Core Environmental Justice Framework

Distributive justice, procedural justice, justice as recognition and the capabilities framework are interconnected and not siloed within the environmental justice framework. Communities who experience historical marginalisation, specifically ethnic and racialised communities, are often left out of the decision-making process, both intentionally as well as accidentally. The reason for this is that the knowledge, values and perspectives of marginalised communities are either devalued or disrespected, leading to misrecognition. A lack of equitable participation in the decision-making process leads to an unequal distribution of environmental benefits (green spaces, pedestrian walkways) and risks (poor housing, waste and sewage systems), in other words, distributive injustice. As a result, the over-exposure to environmental risk and/or under-exposure to environmental benefits lead to the deterioration of a community's capability to thrive (for example, poor physical and mental health outcomes).

In this research brief, we focus on the procedural justice aspect of environmental justice. Procedural justice in environmental contexts ensures fair participation in the decision-making processes for affected communities (Bell & Carrick, 2017). On this topic, the literature offers different examples of the principles of procedural justice, from Hunold and Young's (1998) idealistic five principles, which include authoritative decision-making where the community has the final say, to Carrick et al.'s (2023) four principles of inclusivity, process-orientation,

empowerment, and reflection. However, the fundamental idea that they emphasise is that procedural justice could be obtained through access to information, meaningful engagement, and the ability to influence outcomes (Gellers & Jeffords, 2018; Suiseeya, 2020). The ability of residents to participate in local decision-making and to feel secure in their neighbourhoods represent key aspects of social inclusion (Sengupta et al., 2013).

In Auckland's inner city, where over 60% of residents identify as ethnic (Stats NZ 2024), understanding patterns of civic engagement and community perception is becoming increasingly important. This brief examines how residents perceive and engage with Auckland's inner city, focusing on three dimensions: demographic representation in decision-making, barriers to civic engagement, and community perceptions. It also examines residents' perceptions about their city, particularly in relation to safety.

Methodology

The analysis draws on survey data collected in 2023 from 128 inner-city Auckland residents. The survey amalgamates questions from several domestic and international environmental, health, and well-being surveys with environmental racism/racialisation and environmental justice literature to provide theoretical framing. The survey investigated environmental racialisation and its drivers and impacts through housing and the neighbourhood environment, as well as social well-being and self-reported health outcomes.

In the context of this research brief, the comprehensive survey examined multiple dimensions of civic participation and perception, including:

- Neighbourhood involvement and decision-making participation
- Council and community meeting attendance
- Safety perceptions and concerns
- Cultural participation and access
- Environmental quality perceptions

Statistical analyses were conducted using 'R' to examine patterns across demographic groups, focusing particularly on gender, migration status, and length of residency.

In addition to survey data, the analyses incorporate insights from key informant interviews and focus group participants. Three key informants from local government officials and ethnic-focused organisations were interviewed, along with three focus groups, totalling nine participants with residents from the City Centre who were ethnic migrants.

Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents

The survey respondents represented a diverse group reflective of Auckland's inner-city population. Of the survey participants (n = 128), 50.0% identified as female, 42.2% as male, 3.1% as Other / Trans / Non-binary, and 4.7% preferred not to say. In total, 24.2% were born in NZ, 17.2% were new migrants (<2 years), 56.2% were established/old migrants (≥2 years), and 2.3% gave no response.

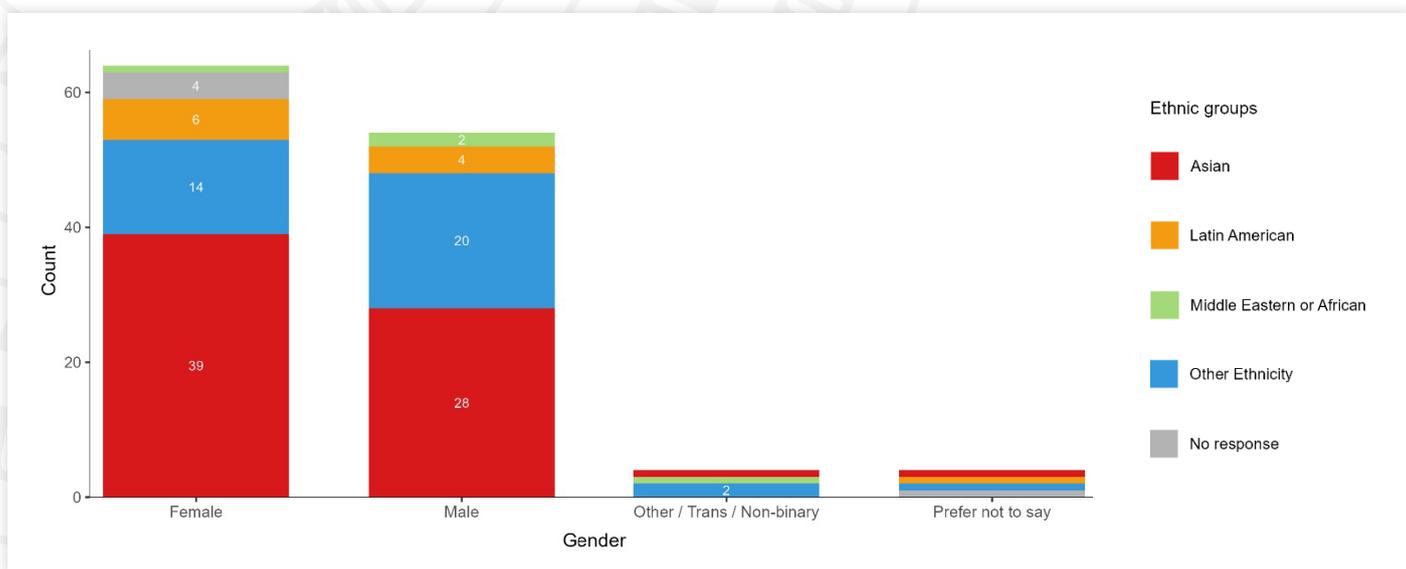


Figure 2: Gender Distribution of Survey Respondents by Ethnicity (n=128)

Of the 128 survey respondents, 121 reported their ethnicity. Among these, 57.0% identified as Asian (n = 69), 30.6% as Other Ethnicity (n = 37), 9.1% as Latin American (n = 11), and 3.3% as Middle Eastern or African (n = 4). Asian respondents were predominantly female (39 females, 28 males, 1 other, 1 prefer not to say). Latin American

respondents were also mostly female (6 females, 4 males, 1 prefer not to say). Middle Eastern or African respondents were evenly distributed by gender (2 females and 2 males). Other Ethnicity respondents included 14 females, 20 males, and 3 identifying as other or preferring not to say.

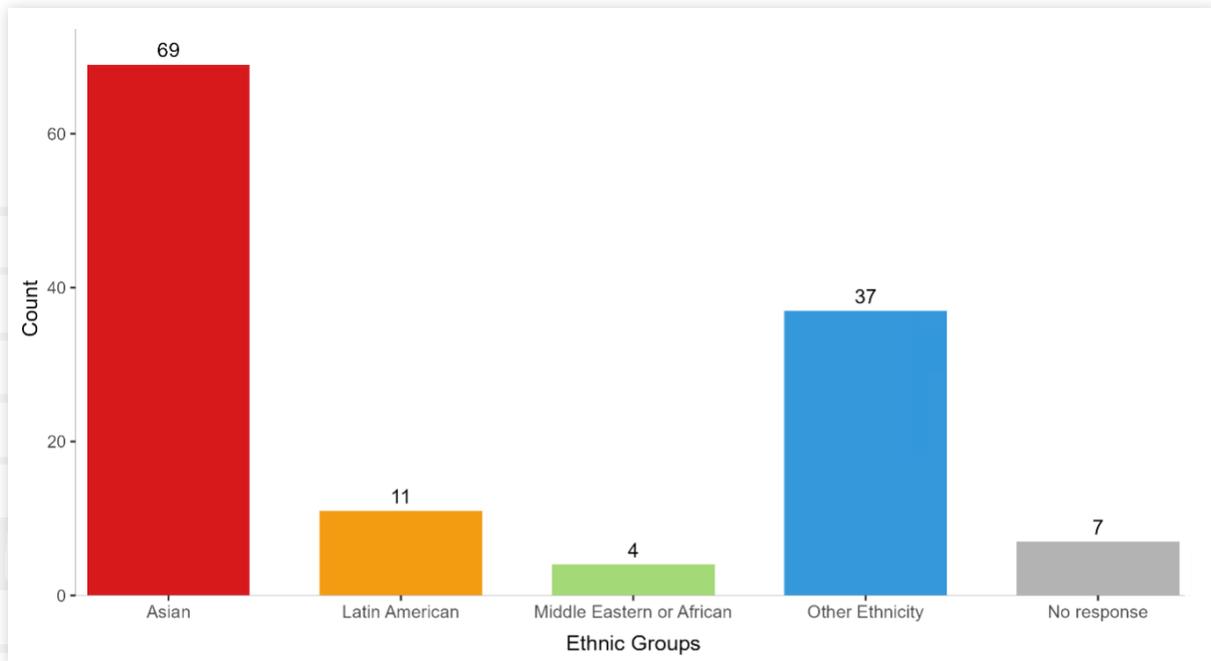


Figure 3: Ethnic Distribution of Survey Respondents (n=128)

In total, 42.3% of the respondents were classified as new migrants (residing in New Zealand for less than two years), while 57.7% were either old migrants (residing for more than two years) or New Zealand-born. Asian respondents were the largest ethnic group across all migration categories, with more women than men, particularly among new and old migrants. Latin American respondents were predominantly new migrants, with women outnumbering men. New Zealand-born respondents were less ethnically diverse, with representation primarily from Asian and Other Ethnicity groups. Middle Eastern or African respondents were primarily new migrants, potentially reflecting recent migration trends.

Of 121 respondents who provided information on migration status, a total of 31 participants were born in New Zealand, 21 were classified as new migrants (residing in New Zealand for less than two years), and 69 were classified as old migrants (residing for two years or more). Asian participants constituted the largest ethnic group within each migration category, particularly among old migrants. Latin

American participants were represented only among new and old migrants, while Middle Eastern or African participants were present in smaller numbers across all categories. Participants born in New Zealand predominantly identified Other Ethnicity, with a smaller proportion identifying as Asian.

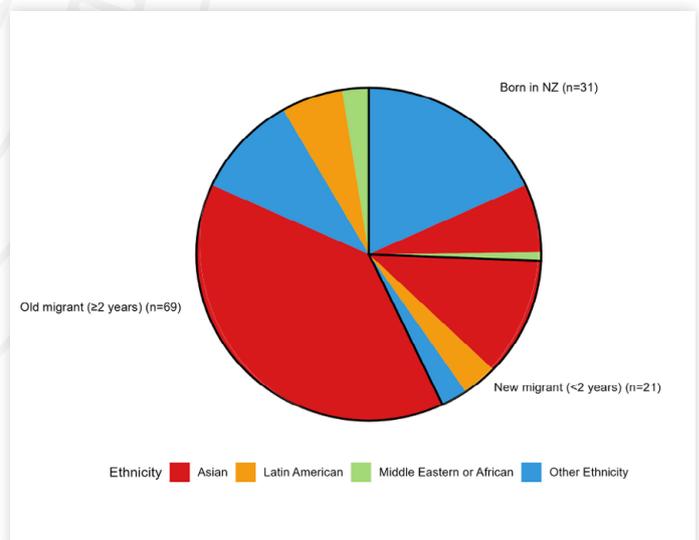


Figure 4: Distribution of Respondents by Migration Status and Ethnicity (n = 121, excluding non-respondents)

Migration Category	Asian	Middle Eastern or African	Other Ethnicity	Latin American	Total
Born in NZ	8	1	22	0	31
New migrant (<2 years)	14	0	3	4	21
Old migrant (≥2 years)	47	3	12	7	69
Total	69	4	37	11	121

Table 1: Counts of participants by migration category and ethnicity group (n = 121, excluding non-respondents)

Findings and Discussion

Civic Engagement

Participation in local decision-making was low across all demographic groups in Auckland's inner city. Among survey respondents, 78.2% reported low involvement in neighbourhood decision-making, while only 21.8% reported high involvement. Gender was a significant factor, with males 4.17 times more likely to report high involvement in neighbourhood decision-making compared to females (OR = 4.9,

95% CI 1.66-16.75), although the precision of this estimate is limited by small subgroup counts.

The original survey question asked participants: "Do you feel personally involved in the decision-making process regarding what happens in your neighbourhood?" Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale from "Not at all" to "An extreme amount", then dichotomised into "Low Involvement" (including "Not at all", "A little", and "Not sure") and "High Involvement" (including "Moderately", "Very much", and "An extreme amount").

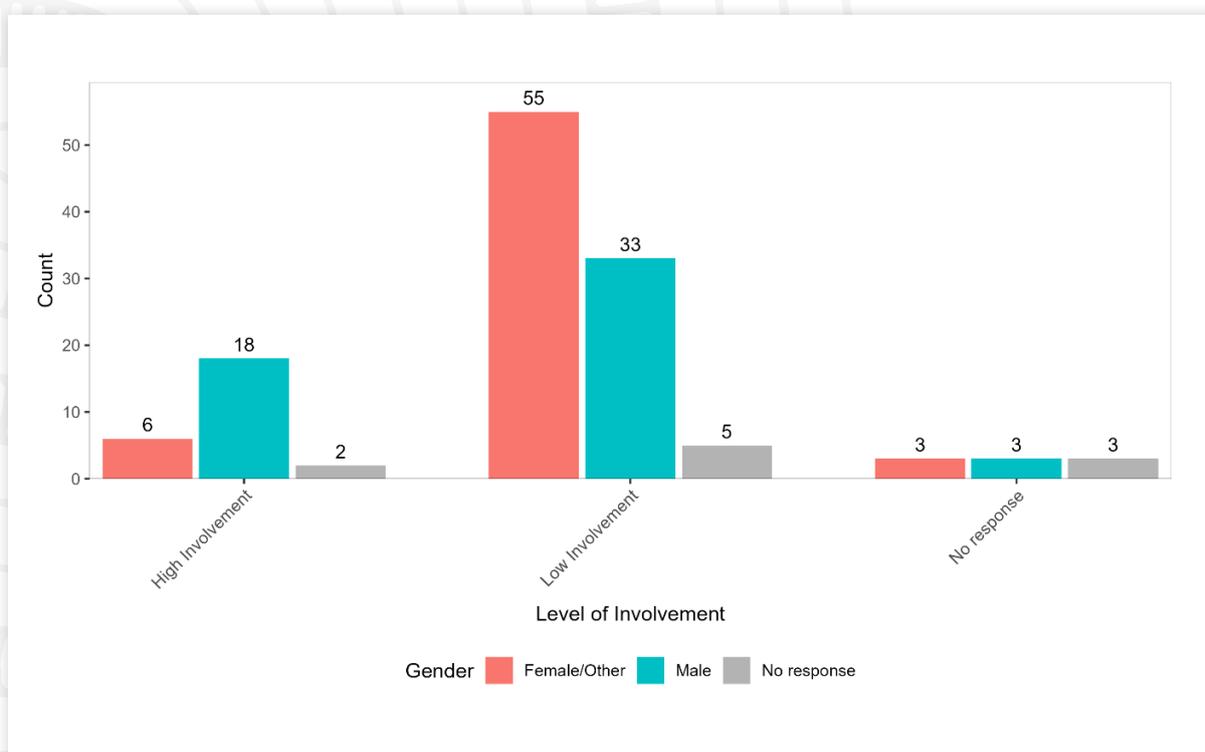


Figure 5: Level of Involvement in Neighbourhood Decision-Making Processes by Gender (n = 128)

Attendance at formal local meetings was low across all demographic groups. Among participants who responded to the question about level of involvement in council meetings (e.g. Auckland Council or Waitemata Local Board)(n = 117), only 8.6% reported attending regularly or a few times; for community meetings (n = 118), the proportion was 10.2%. A small proportion reported that they used to attend but no longer participate (3.4% for council meetings and 3.1% for community meetings). Overall, based on responses to either item (n = 128), 82% of participants reported never participating in either type of meeting. Key informants identified language barriers as a key factor limiting participation in local decision-making amongst ethnic people, with many reporting being unaware of opportunities to inform decision-making, in part due to language barriers or simply because information about such engagement was not provided to them. However, one informant also discussed concerns about having their right to residence revoked for engaging in local governance: "...there's this sort of fear of speaking out because I might end up being bullied, and then I'll end up having to go back, or I'll lose my residency..."

The perception of a 'transient' migrant community was also highlighted by several key informants from local council, suggesting that certain segments of ethnic people in the City Centre are assumed to be temporary residents. ("In the City Centre I think we've got a long way to go...and it's a real challenge because a lot of them are there for short term"). This perception could lead to specific areas of the City Centre being viewed as transient spaces, impacting long-term resource allocation and planning in these areas.

No significant association was found between the years since arrival in New Zealand and the level of neighbourhood involvement or meeting attendance amongst respondents. However, descriptive trends suggest that a longer residency might encourage a higher level of engagement among non-NZ born respondents. Participants who indicated having attended council meetings were found to have lived in New Zealand for an average of 24.3 years compared to 8.9 years for those who reported having not attended. Similarly, those who attended community meetings had lived in New Zealand for an average of 21 years, compared to 9.4 years for non-attendees.

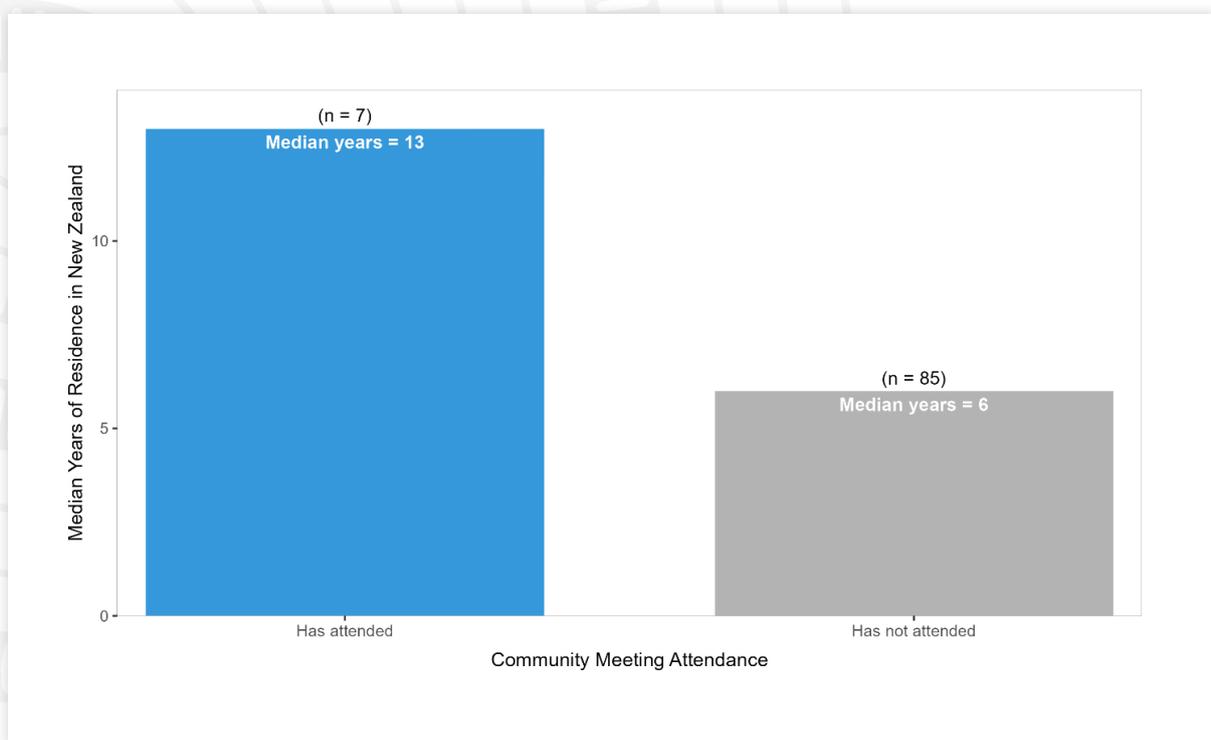


Figure 6: Relationship Between Years of Residence in New Zealand and Community Meeting Attendance among non-NZ born respondents (n= 92).

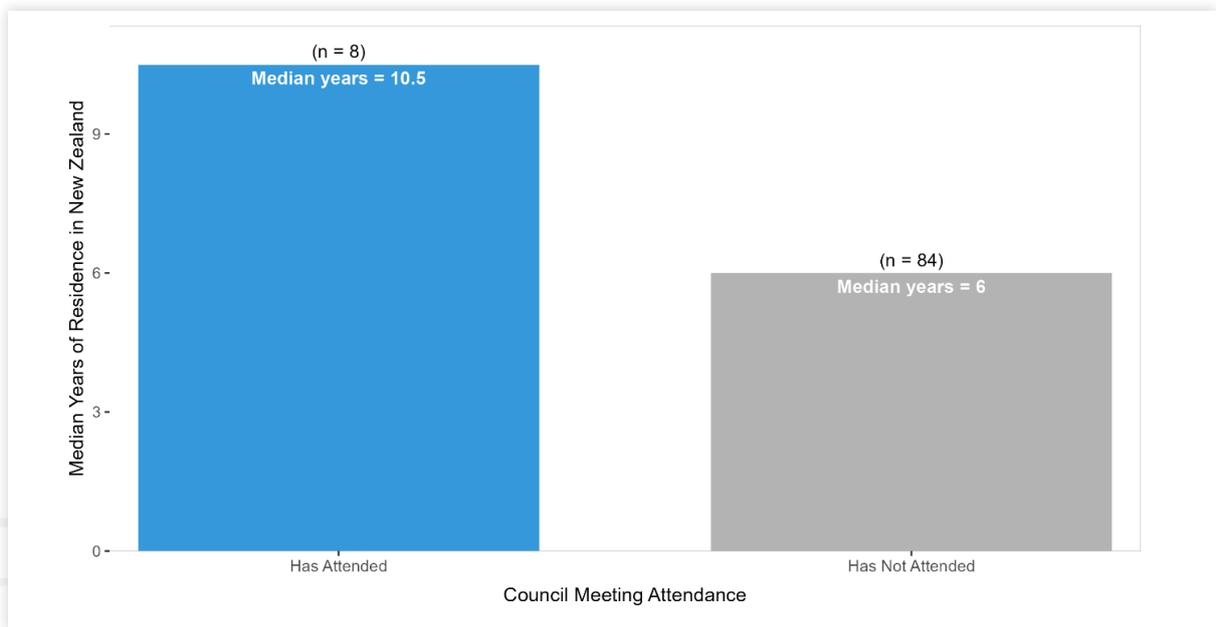


Figure 7: Relationship Between Years of Residence in New Zealand and Council Meeting Attendance among non-NZ born respondents (n= 92)

Safety and Perception Patterns

Safety, or rather the perception of safety, can influence the ways in which people engage with spaces within the city. In the context of environmental racialisation, perceptions of safety are influenced by the placement of environmental hazards and neglect (e.g. a lack of tree coverage, cracked sidewalks, abandoned buildings, etc.) in racialised communities. In addition to physical risks, these placements devalue the spaces and can lead to a rise in criminal and anti-social behaviour (Kou & Sullivan, 2001; Payton Foh et. al, 2021). The result of which leads to the stigmatization of those areas as "dangerous" and lead to a reduction in investment, lack of engagement of spaces by residents and over-policing.

In the study, concerns varied by gender and ethnicity among survey respondents (see Figures 8 and 9). When asked whether they feel safe where they currently live, 49% of Female/Other respondents responded "sometimes" while 34% of males responded "always," with around one in ten in both groups reporting they seldom or never felt safe (Figure 8). Across both questions, Asian respondents accounted for the largest share in each category, with smaller contributions from Latin American, Middle Eastern or African, and Other ethnicities. In response to the question concerning whether it is safe to walk in their neighbourhood, 50% of Female/Other respondents reported it was safe only at certain times or in certain areas, compared with 35% of males; 16% of Female/Other respondents and 22% of males reported it was not safe (Figure 10).

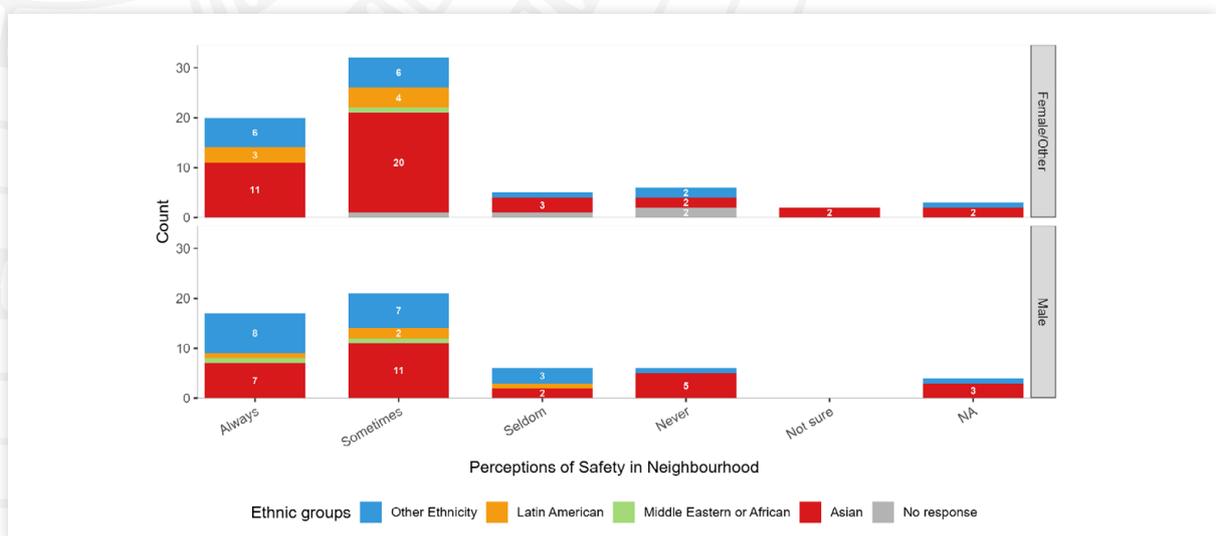


Figure 8: Residential Safety Perceptions Among Inner-City Residents (n=128)

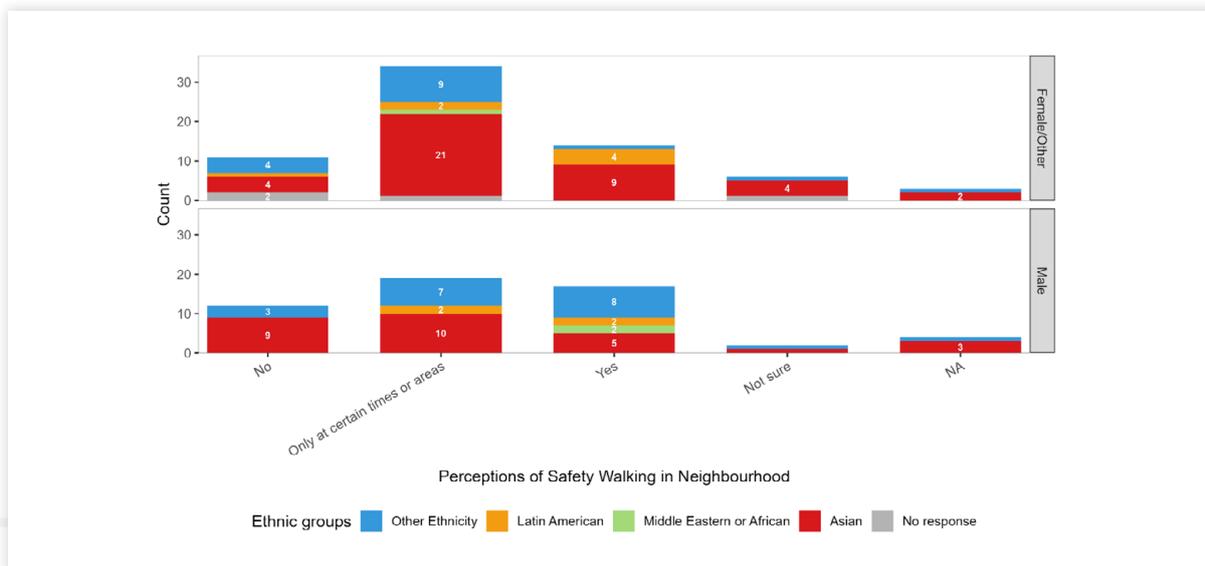


Figure 9: Perceptions of Safety Walking in Neighbourhood Among Inner-City Residents (n=128)

Older migrants reported lower feelings of safety compared to newer migrants and New Zealand-born participants, with crime, road noise, and traffic congestion being the most prominent concerns. While safety concerns were found to be less pronounced among NZ-born participants compared to migrants overall, they typically shared

similar concerns to older migrants, reporting issues around road noise, traffic congestion, and crime. In contrast, new migrants generally expressed more concern about accessibility issues, such as a lack of amenities and outdoor spaces, rather than reporting broader safety concerns.



Figure 10: Negative aspects of Neighbourhood reported by Inner-City Residents (n=128)

Key informant interviews highlighted specific safety concerns about the presence of unhoused people and antisocial individuals in the area, expressing concerns about dangerous behaviour. One informant discussed the impact of construction projects around the City Centre. While they reported feeling that the city masterplan was a wonderful vision, they believed that ongoing

development and roadworks activity was driving 'unsavoury' individuals into the area who 'did not respect the space'. As environmental racialisation literature highlights, environmental impacts, even temporary ones, affect both the use of space and who occupies it. The account from this informant suggests that the perceived disruption or degradation of an environment aesthetic may

influence racialised perceptions of these spaces and their occupants. Some informant interviews also emphasised greater concerns around physical safety and health impacts due to vehicular traffic.

Perceptions of neighbourhood cleanliness varied overall. While over half of respondents (55%) rated their neighbourhood as clean or very clean, around 45% perceived it as dirty or very dirty. Importantly, respondents overwhelmingly reported accessibility as a key influence in the decision to live in the City

Centre. Across all responses, accessibility was highlighted most frequently as a positive aspect of the neighbourhood, with 17.2% of responses referring to access to public transport, 15.8% to employment, and 15% to amenities. Cultural diversity was also commonly identified as a positive aspect of the neighbourhood (9.8% of responses). This was consistent across participants born in NZ and new migrants or migrants who had lived in NZ for over two years.

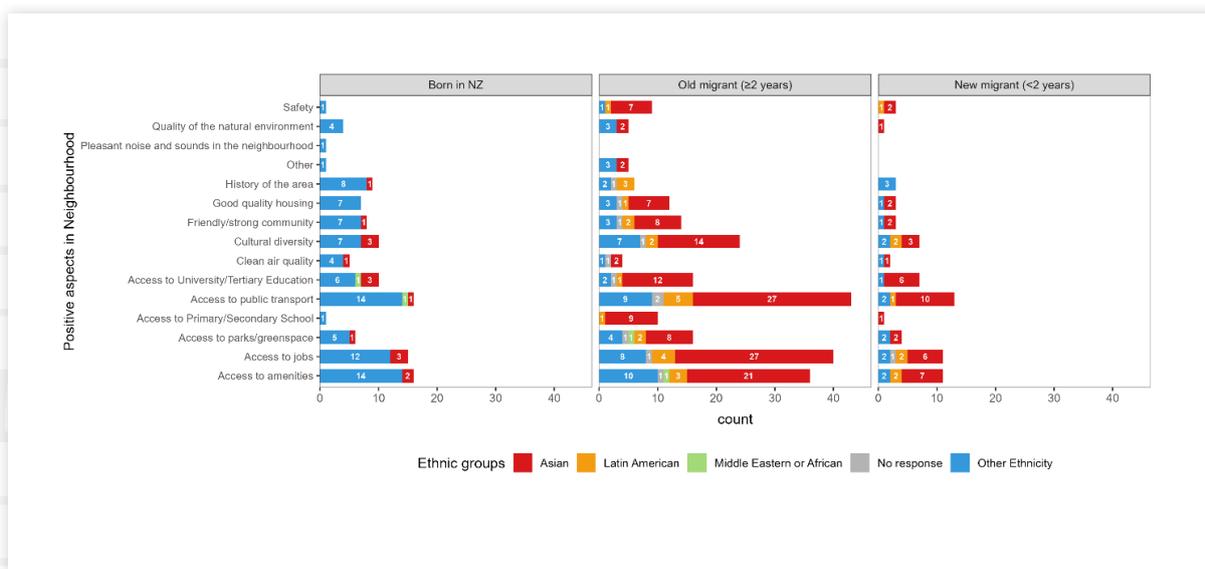


Figure 12: Positive aspects of Neighbourhood reported by Inner-City Respondents (n=128)

Recommendations and future directions

This study is a first step in addressing the overwhelming gap within Aotearoa research regarding environmental racism, racialisation and environmental justice among ethnic and migrant populations. In the context of the Auckland City Centre, there is a pressing need to recognise the importance of effective and purposeful community and civic engagement, as well as perceptions of community places and neighbourhoods. In the following sections, we offer recommendations for addressing civic participation and the impacts of perception in investment and urban planning.

Recommendation #1: Enable participation through improved access

One of the constant themes, both in the survey and the focus groups was that participants claimed that they either did not know about council meetings

or there were barriers to engaging, specifically around language. There were also anecdotal comments made about issues around the planning of the meetings (location, time, childcare). Below are recommendations for how to address potential barriers to civic participation.

Accessibility of Information:

The first recommendation for increasing participation in the City Centre and other metropolitan areas is to ensure information is accessible. While the local council and boards provide information regarding local meetings on their website, accessing that information is challenging if you do not know what to look for, especially for those who are not tech-savvy, for whom English is not their first language or for those who simply do not incorporate much information technology into their daily lives. Additional support must be provided to fill the information gap, especially for ethnic migrant communities. Rather than creating new panels

and boards within the local government structure, we recommend working with smaller, more niche ethnic community groups (many of whom may meet in other parts of Auckland but have connections to the City Centre). In addition, as recommended by one of the focus group participants, councils and local boards may want to work closely with embassies and consulates as another avenue for reaching migrant communities.

An overlooked discussion area in informing City Centre residents is the role that the building environment, namely the apartment buildings themselves, plays. Apartment buildings are largely physically inaccessible (for example, they often have security gates). Thus, anyone seeking to share communication with residents there needs to be active in engaging with building managers and body corporates in order to gain access. As we experienced in this research project, building managers and body corporates can either make or break access to information for residents as they decide whether or not it will be possible to put flyers in mailboxes or use their message board. One way to solve the accessibility issue from a policy perspective would be to update Section 84 for Unit Titles Act 2010, requiring a body corporate to either appoint or hire (similar to a building manager) a social/community liaison that would work closely with local councils to provide an open channel of communication between the local governing bodies and residents.

Accessibility of participation through better meeting planning

Improving participation of residents requires careful consideration as to how meetings are planned. The following are recommendations to make council meetings more accessible and purposeful.

a) Addressing language and cultural barriers:

As highlighted in this brief, one of the barriers to ethnic communities participating in council/community meetings or reaching out to local government in general is the language/cultural barrier. While this may be addressed in some areas by offering translations of flyers and documents in different languages, the next step is to provide language and cultural support DURING local board and cultural meetings. Examples of this include

offering translated recordings of council meetings and having translators available in meetings.

b) Addressing exclusion through the planning process:

The exclusion of ethnic migrants (and, to a broader extent, other communities) begins at the planning stage, in other words, whether the meeting is held in an accessible location and at a convenient time. In the context of the City Centre, the Ellen Melville Centre and the Local City Centre Library provide community space for hosting council meetings that may be easier to access for many people. In addition to being mindful of the physical location, local councils and boards could also host multiple meetings, both in person and hybrid (web features), and provide 'catch up' sessions or information pages for people unable to attend. Another way to encourage people to attend is to offer childcare so that single parents/guardians or those with small children can bring them to the meetings.

Recommendation #2: Combat Meeting Fatigue through supporting 'Real' influence:

The final observation made during the study concerns the growing presence of fatigue in the decision-making process. Even with accessible information and opportunities to participate, if residents feel that they hold no real influence in the decision-making process, they are less likely to attend. Meanwhile, the current local and central government power structures are not designed to cater to the idealistic version of procedural justice that Hunold and Young (1998) prescribe. Bell and Carrick (2017) argue for more of a middle ground where the fluidity of influence (rather than authority) provides the opportunity for residents' influence depending on the current laws and policies. This would involve local and central government reevaluating the consultation processes to ensure that enough time is given for individuals and communities to respond, as well as finding areas in the policy to provide more communal, residential influence and empowerment.

Recommendation #3: Perceptions and Policy: Addressing negative perceptions and investment inequalities

Another key area is understanding the connections between residents' perceptions of the city, their

engagement in their communities, and the built environment itself. These interlinkages impact urban planning and the built environment, particularly as perceptions influence how people use and navigate public spaces.

Perceptions of communities by local government decision-makers also impact how said communities are prioritised for investment. To address investment inequality caused by such negative perceptions of a neighbourhood, policymakers should consider a multi-faceted approach that includes community engagement and equitable policy interventions. Below are some potential areas for future consideration:

(a) Community Engagement

As mentioned in the previous section, civic/community engagement is critical for addressing the negative perceptions of the City Centre and other neighbourhoods and the resulting impacts on economic and social investment. In addition to conducting research with the community to trace the root of the negative perceptions of the City Centre, local government must work in relationship with residents and businesses to develop solutions.

(b) Equitable Policy Interventions

Local and central governments must review and update their urban planning and development policies (and enforcement of those policies). Decision-makers are not above unintentional biases that could impact how governments prioritise investment in a city or neighbourhood. For example, in the case of the City Centre, there is a perception of lack of safety, and thus more investment needs to be made into policing and surveillance. Unfortunately, this will be focussed on areas of perceived importance (i.e. local business areas). The policy should include guidelines for prioritisation that extend beyond economic development and encourage initiatives that focus on areas of the city that have previously been neglected.

A possible future guide for determining prioritisation of public projects is to develop an 'Environmental Equity Index' (Carrier et al. 2016; Lorenzo et al., 2024; see also Government of Canada (undated) and Port Seattle (undated)). The Environmental Equity Index or EEI, combines improvement to the natural and build environments, with considerations of

past investment patterns, and address negative perceptions through community-led storytelling and focusing on community strengths rather than only its deficits.

Notes

1. The term 'ethnic' is an official population category in New Zealand used by the Ministry of Ethnic Communities (MEC) to refer to people who originate from Asia, Middle East, Africa, Latin America and Continental Europe. While this term is used widely in policy, it is also a fraught concept. Ethnic groups as defined by StatsNZ – the government's official department for collecting statistics – refers to self-defined characteristics for the whole population not merely those listed above. Similarly, there are also intersections with the term 'migrant'. There is a significant, but not exclusive, overlap between people who have migrated to New Zealand since the 1990s, and people of ethnic origin – not all ethnic people are migrants nor are all migrants to New Zealand of ethnic origin. From within the ethnic community, there is also disquiet at the clustering together of racialised (Asian and MeLAA) and non-racialised (Continental European) groups under the same label particularly as their lived realities are vastly diverse. For the purposes of this research brief and given the focus on racism, the term ethnic is used to refer to racialised groups within the category ethnic and will be used interchangeably with 'migrant' and 'ethnic migrant'.

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WERO is funded by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. The research programme is hosted by the University of Waikato with support from the following institutions: University of Auckland, Victoria University Wellington, Otago University, Motu Economic and Public Policy, University of Toronto, University of Washington.

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