

Confronting everyday racism in HE: challenges and solidarities of anti-racist activism

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17th November 2021



the**Whistle**.org



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE
Department of Sociology

Doing Anti-racist Academic Activism in the University



- EM and MMF Research trajectories on human rights and on racism
- ‘Anti-racist turn’ within the UK HE sector: “I too I’m Cambridge”, Rhodes must fall, decolonising the curriculum, etc...
- Experience as lecturers and directors of studies at Cambridge.
- Embedded institutional logics of systematically rejecting claims of racism in the university, alongside a continuous demand of data to confirm its existence.
- We joined efforts from our expertise on digital activism and anti-racist interventions to design the End Everyday Racism research and intervention project.
- We consulted widely with anti-racist university grassroots organisations.

END EVERYDAY RACISM

Your story matters. Record racism for a better Cambridge.

SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCE



the**Whistle**.org

- Launched in 2018 – www.racismatcambridge.org
- A web-based reporting/mapping tool that collects accounts of racism from across the University, to understand how racism is experienced at Cambridge and advocate for institutional change.
- "The facts, alone, will not save us" (Ruha Benjamin)
- Takes on the demand of facts to offer the data we (university grassroots organisations) want to give.
- The project was resisted by some who said that the project amplified the perception of racism, rather than being a platform to document racism
- This project now sits in the midst of a massive attack to the University leadership on anti-racist work with an uncritical blatant confusion around freedom of speech and social mistreatment.



The Project

Aims to:

- Open a listening space of validation and recognition of everyday racism for members of the university community
- Generate knowledge about how everyday racism works in higher education for the university administration.
- inform the work of student and staff antiracist activism pushing the agenda for institutional change.
- Move from what racism in the university (or elsewhere) is – what's the story – to what everyday racism does to a community.
- Create an archive that critically strengthens a culture of complaint that 'chips away at institutional structures' (Sara Ahmed)
- raise a collective case against racism challenging the logics of the 'case' of neoliberal individuals



EER's design responds
to a particular
landscape of
information politics

- Technological solutionism (Morozov 2013)
 - **Methodology of solidarity**, as much about the **process** as the **product**
 - **Collective** witnessing events and **community** discussions
 - Witnesses can download a **PDF of their testimonies** and are connected to **further resources**
- 'Datafication of injustice' (Benjamin 2019)
 - Witnesses are asked to provide **details on the incident** of everyday racism and – unique to this project – **emotional and physical consequences**
- Discreditation through pollution
 - Participants **verify their community membership** through the use of an institutional email address, data that is checked and then deleted

EER is a witnessing
project

- Witnessing is **seeing something** and then **saying something** (Peters 2001)
- Witnessing is **stabilising uncertain ground** through **representation** and **interpretation** of what happened (Mortensen 2015)
- Witness struggles are around **speaking** and **being heard**
- **Epistemology** of witnessing:
 - 'Detection' *and* 'recognition' (Benjamin 2019)
 - 'Data visualisation' *versus* 'data visceralisation' (D'Ignazio & Klein 2019)
- **Ethics** of witnessing: Witnessing as an end and a means (McPherson 2019)



END EVERYDAY RACISM

We will not collect any information from this form until you click "Submit" at the end of the survey.

You can skip questions, or go back to previous questions, using the blue up and down arrows in the bottom right-hand corner.

1 → Are you reporting on behalf of yourself, someone else, or as an observer/witness?

☐ A Myself

☐ B Someone else

☐ C As an observer/witness

☐ D Other

OK ✓



Powered by **Typeform**

If you are experiencing technical difficulties with the report form, you can log them [here](#).

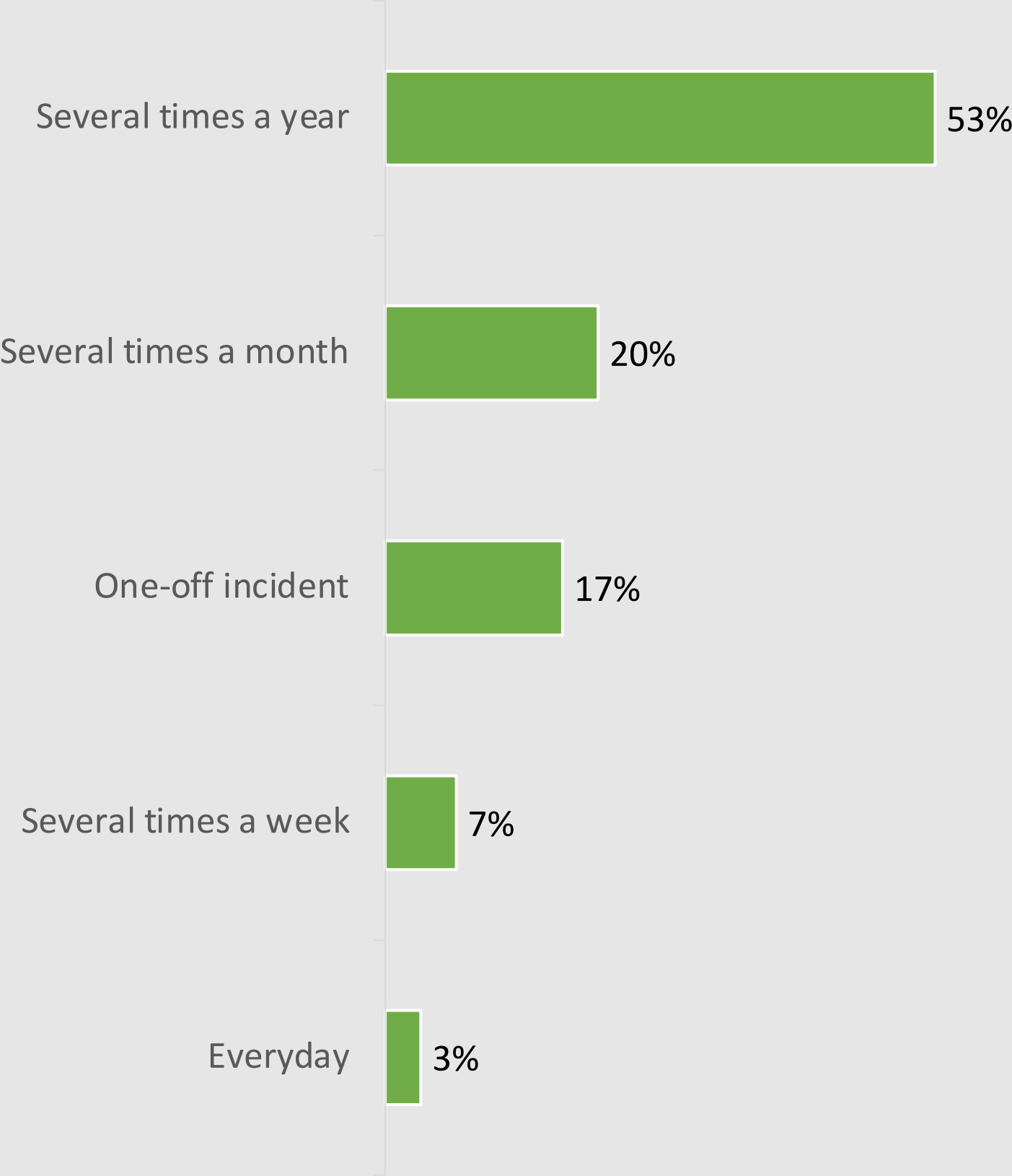


Overview of testimonies

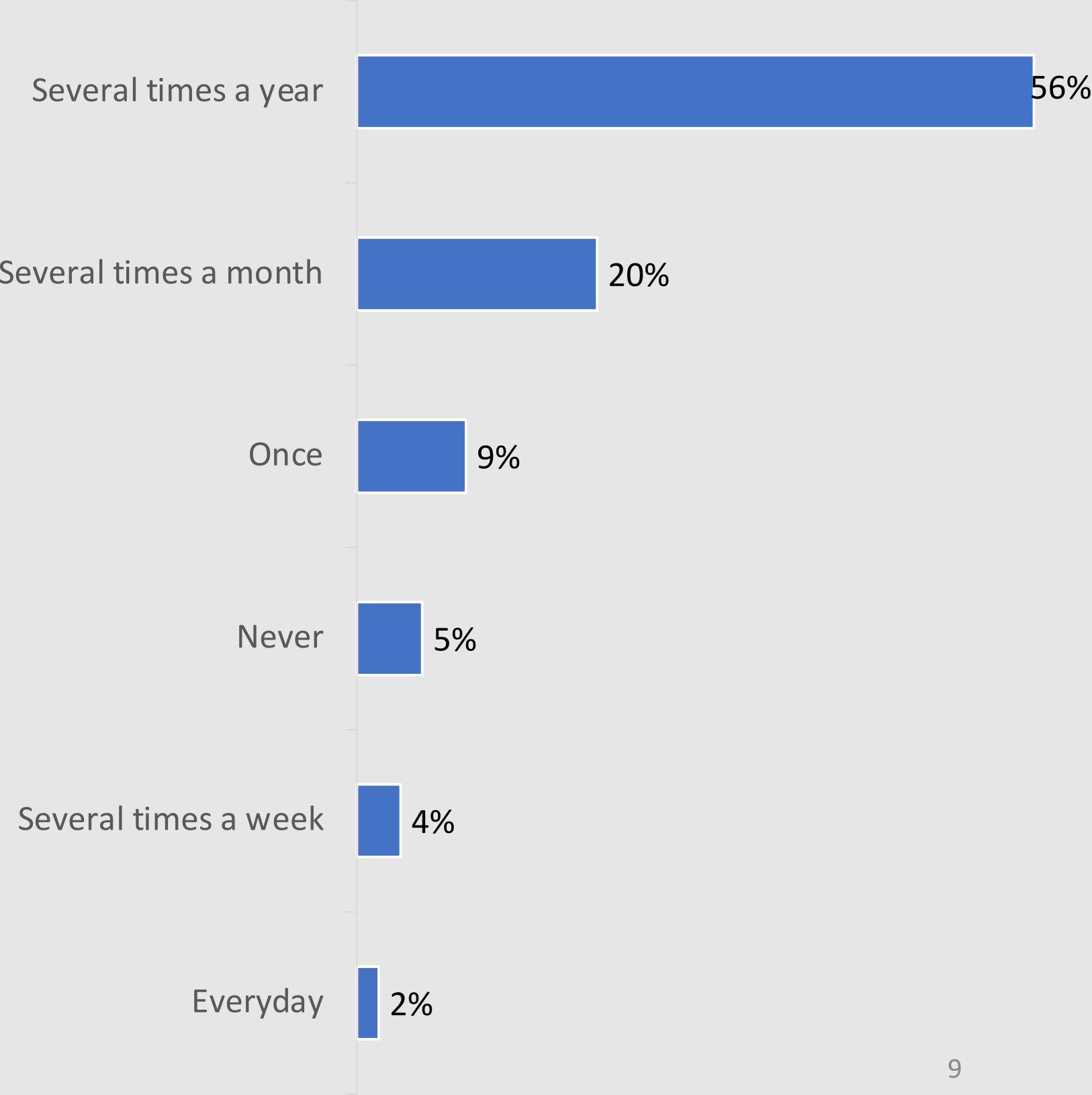
- 117 testimonies between October 2018 and 15 June 2020
- 82% experienced the incident themselves, 13% reported as an observer or witness, and 5% on behalf of someone else
- 87% of reporters are students. This is followed by academic staff with 10%
- 40% of reporters identify as Asian, 28% as Black

Frequency that reporters experience or witness racist incidents

Type frequency, n=59

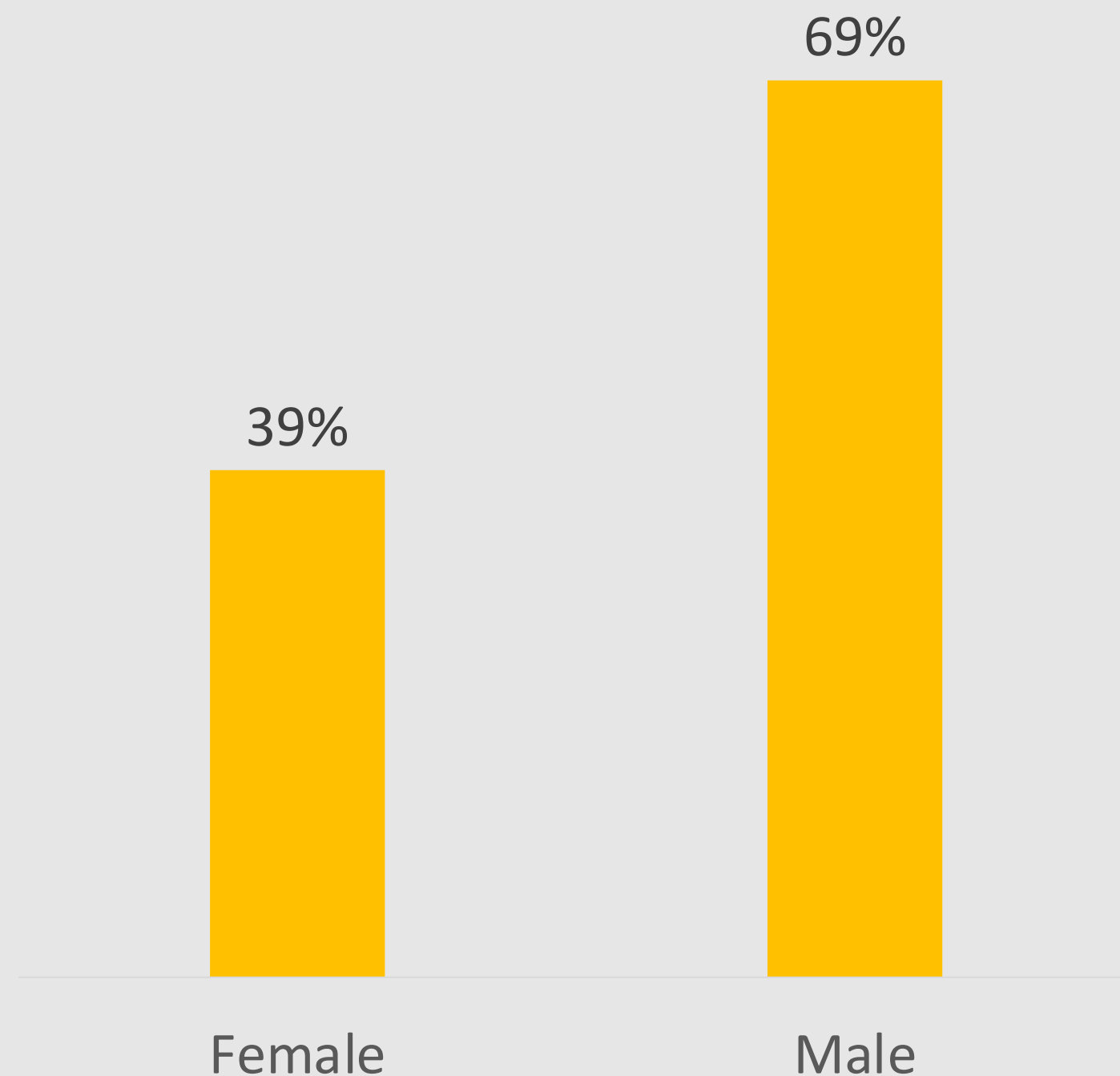


Overall frequency, n=55



Gender and racialisation

Perpetrators' gender, n=59



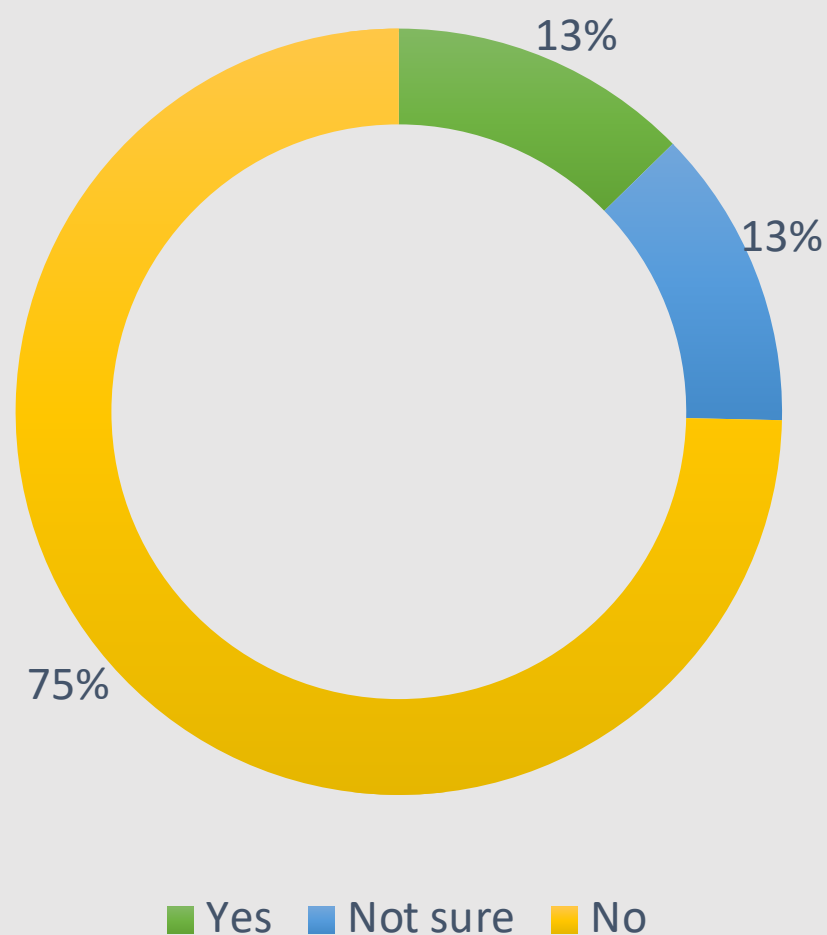
Respondents' gender

- 34 out of 48 respondents stated 'being female' as a relevant identity to the incident.
- Only 3 out of 48 stated 'being male' as a relevant identity.

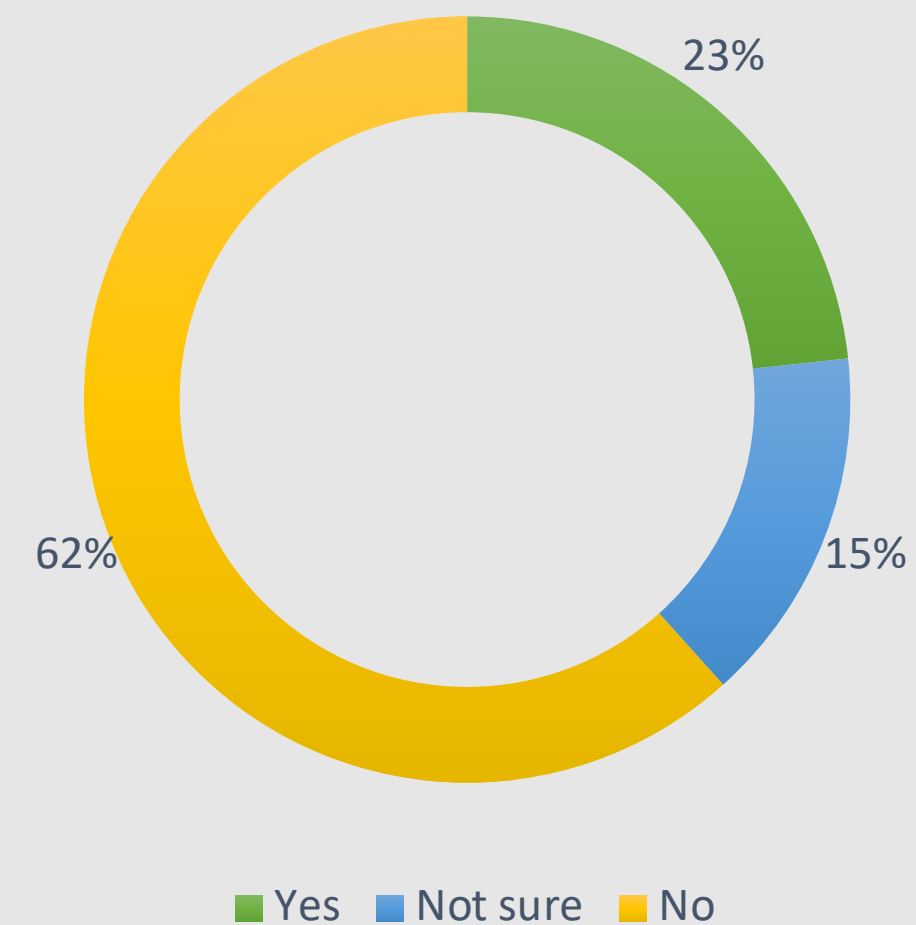
Racist incidents impact respondents' work and studies

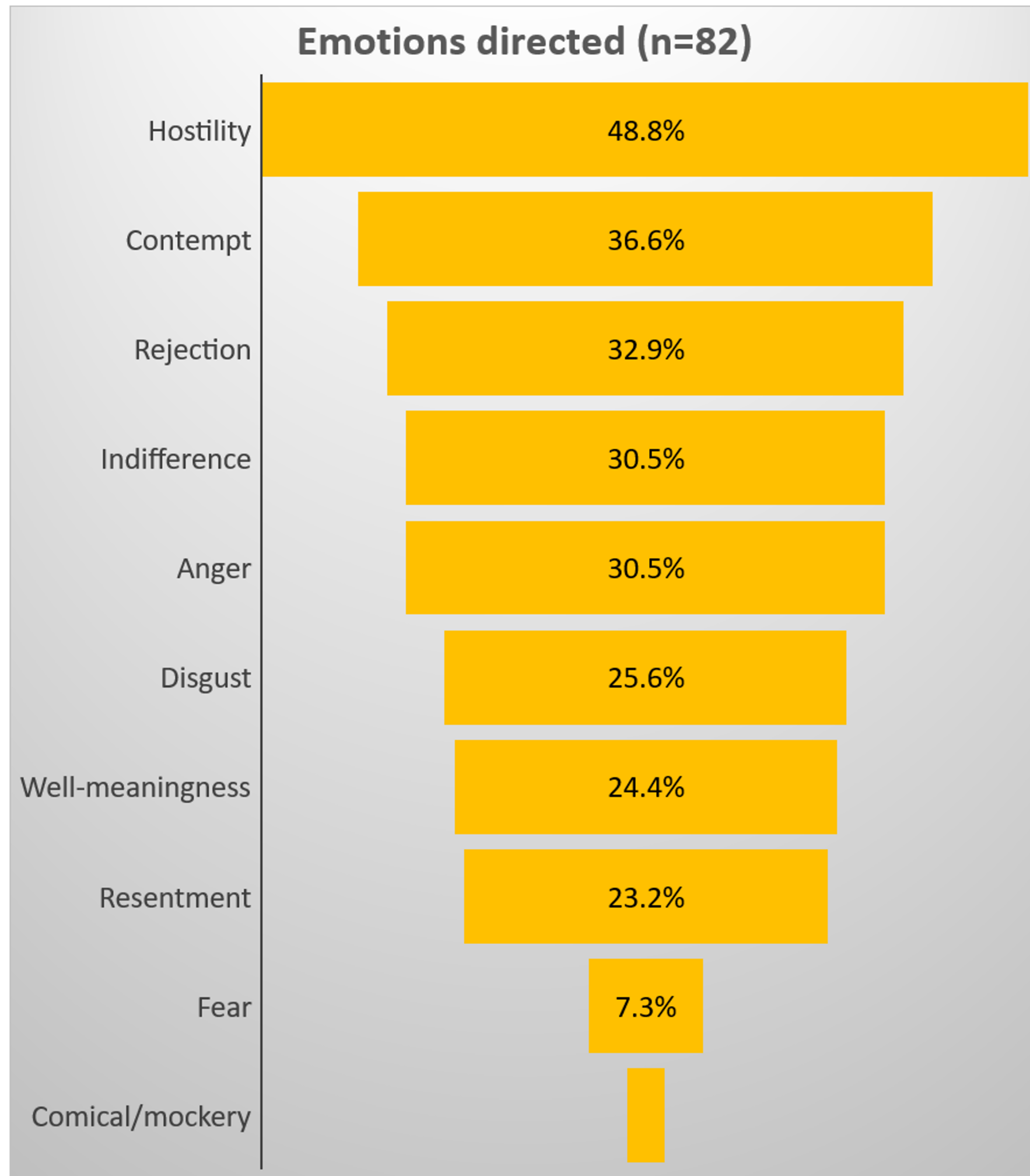
More than 1 in 4 people who have reported a racist incident feel that their job or study is, or is potentially, at risk as a result of the incident. One-third of reporters have stated that the incident might have made or did make it difficult for them to perform well in their work or studies.

Job/study feels at risk (n=71)



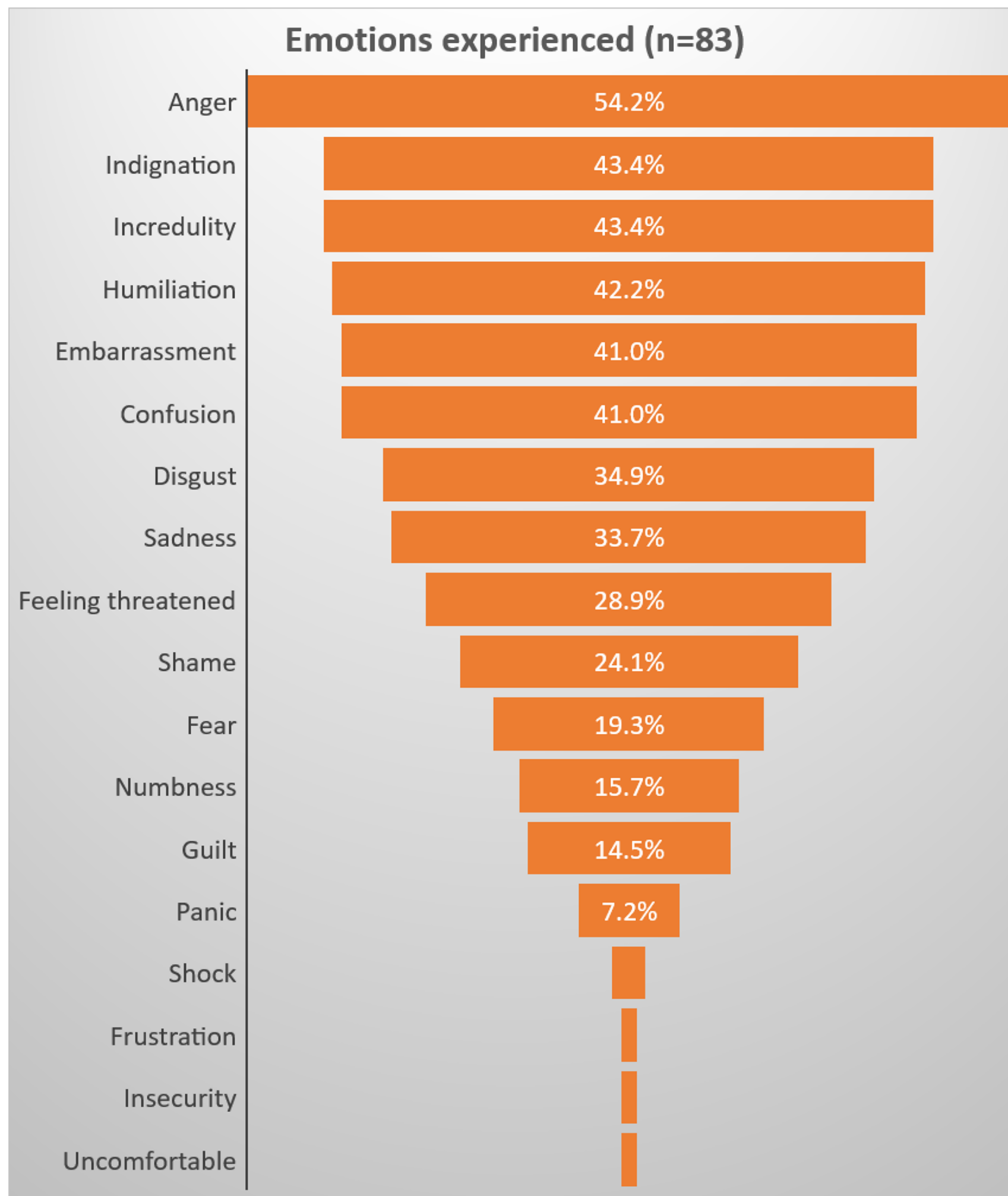
Job/study made more difficult (n=73)





Almost 50% experienced hostility directed towards them followed by contempt and rejection

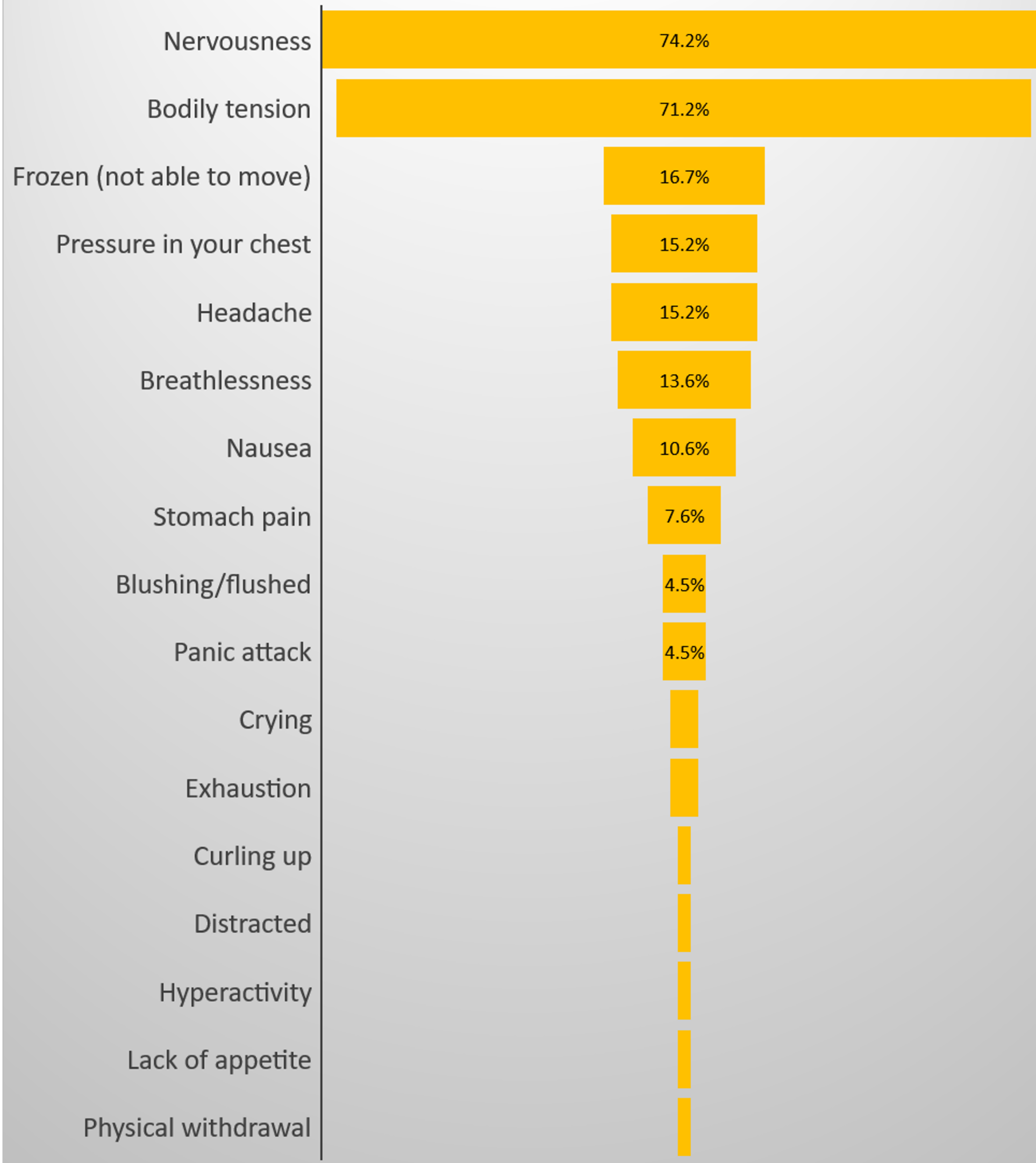
In detailing their experience of everyday racism, almost half the respondents reported feeling that hostility was directed towards them, while a third of reporters felt themselves to be the object of contempt and/or rejection.



More than 50% of respondents felt anger followed by indignation, incredulity, humiliation, embarrassment and confusion

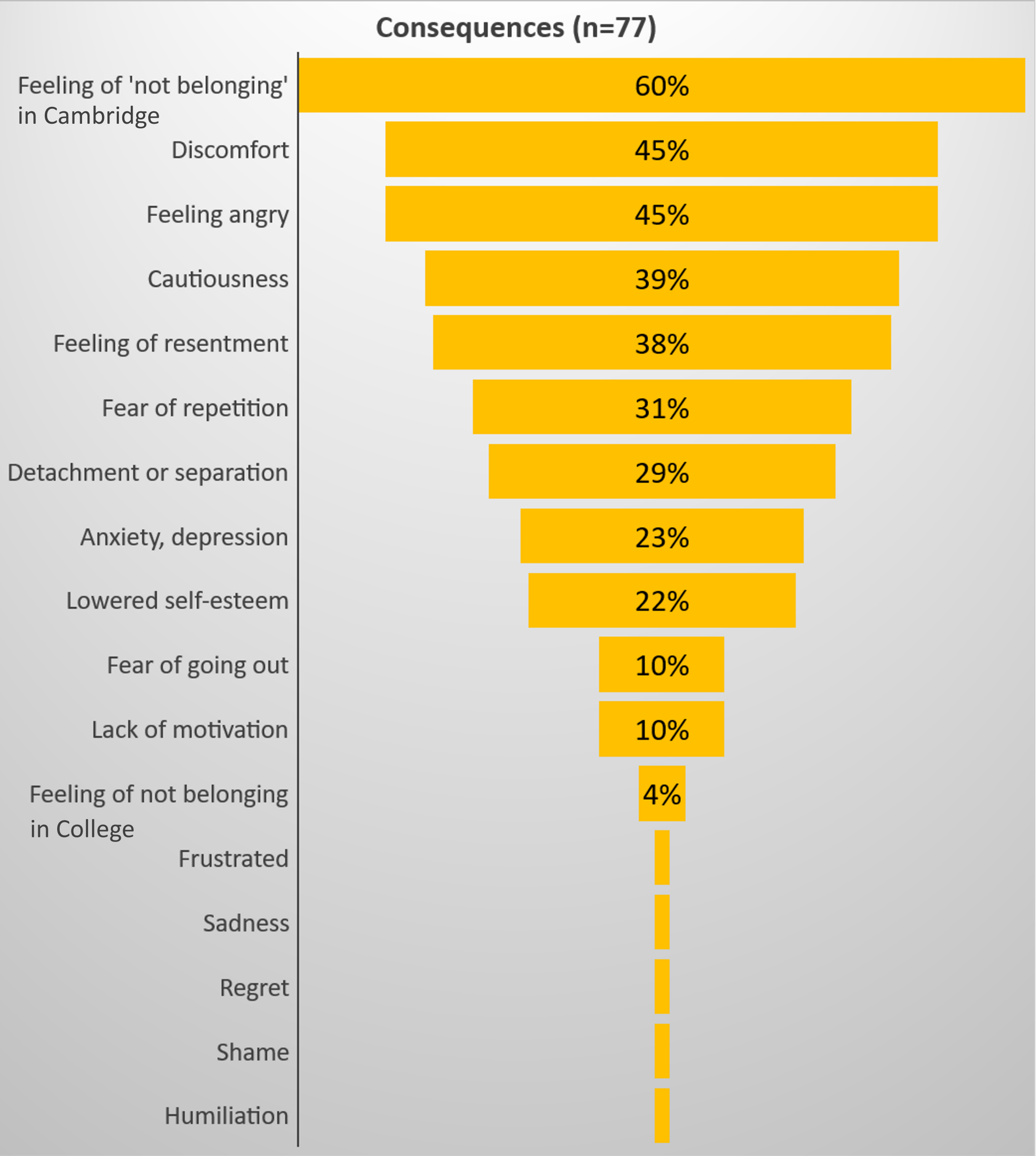
Eighty-three respondents documented feeling a total of 373 emotions during the racist incidents they reported. More than half of them reported feeling angry. Indignation, incredulity, humiliation, embarrassment and confusion were experienced by more than 40 percent of the respondents.

Physical reactions (n=66)



The vast majority of respondents felt physical reactions like nervousness and bodily tension

Feelings of nervousness and bodily tension have been experienced by more than 70 percent of respondents as a result of the racist incident.



Key consequences of racism are feelings of not belonging in Cambridge, discomfort and anger

Sixty percent of respondents reported a feeling of not belonging in Cambridge as a consequence of the racist incident they experienced. Almost half of reporters felt discomfort and/or anger following the incident.



Feedback shows that EER benefited witnesses profoundly, as they feel their experiences are seen and validated.

EER's process has made it possible for those who have experienced and witnessed racism to feel solidarity.

*'I am **happy** that for once someone is addressing **this issue** in Cambridge as I felt it was swept under the carpet for too long.'*

*'It's been great writing this down, definitely feels **therapeutic** in a way. I would say that using our experiences as testimonials to convince the university to establish strict practices would be very useful.'*

*'This is great and I feel like **a weight has been lifted**, thank you so much!'*

*'I would just like to say this is a **great initiative**, and Cambridge really has no excuse for not having done this before.'*



Insights from the data

- Need for validation of feelings and experiences
- Experiencing powerlessness
 - feeling like one cannot officially report the incident,
 - feeling powerless when one does file a complaint,
 - the status hierarchy between the perpetrator and perpetrated that exacerbates the situation.
- Feeling excluded from physical spaces
 - Participants reported 40 incidents where they were either refused entry to a physical space, were discriminated against as they were entering a space, or did not feel safe about returning to the space where the incident occurred.
 - Being “portered”
- Revealing ingrained racism

Conclusion: Reflections on the individual and the collective



- This is one intervention that cannot stand alone
- A key element of this project is its well-publicised focus on the terrain of racism at the University, not on individual cases
 - This directs attention to structural racism, which is under-studied and under-addressed in this context (Johnson, Johnson, Thomas & Green 2021)
 - This also mitigates a criticism that can stop projects before they start, which is community members' concerns that they will be 'told on' or falsely accused through an anonymous platform with unknown audiences and repercussions
 - This reminds us that we all have an anti-racism responsibility, as both individuals and a collective
- How do we move forward antiracist thinking and action in the midst of organized attacks?
 - Being aware of the logics of attacks (scapegoating, diversion from real issues, focus on mistakes, creating doubts, confusion and fear, breaking down trust and dividing teams).
 - Building solidarity
 - Being strategically visible