



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY, COMMUNITY, HOUSING
AND YOUTH

Reference: Impact of violence on young Australians

WEDNESDAY, 24 FEBRUARY 2010

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY, COMMUNITY, HOUSING AND YOUTH
Wednesday, 24 February 2010

Members: Ms Annette Ellis (*Chair*), Mrs Moylan (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Andrews, Ms Campbell, Mr Ciobo, Ms Collins, Ms Livermore, Mr Raguse, Mr Simpkins and Mr Trevor

Members in attendance: Ms Campbell, Mr Ciobo, Ms Collins, Ms Ellis, Mrs Moylan, Mr Raguse, Mr Simpkins and Mr Trevor

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The impact of violence on young Australians with particular reference to:

- perceptions of violence and community safety among young Australians;
- links between illicit drug use, alcohol abuse and violence among young Australians;
- the relationship between bullying and violence on the wellbeing of young Australians;
- social and economic factors that contribute to violence by young Australians; and
- strategies to reduce violence and its impact among young Australians.

WITNESSES

**CROFT, Ms Deirdre Margaret, Collaboration Manager, Australian Research Alliance for
Children and Youth 1**

Committee met at 10.43 am**CROFT, Ms Deirdre Margaret, Collaboration Manager, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth**

CHAIR (Ms Annette Ellis)—I declare open the fourth public hearing for the inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians. The inquiry was announced on 16 June 2009. Written submissions were called for and 66 have been received to date. I welcome Ms Deirdre Croft from ARACY to give evidence to our committee. Although the committee does not require you to speak under oath, you should understand that these hearings are formal proceedings of the Commonwealth parliament. The giving of false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. We are very grateful that you are here this morning. I want to thank you and your organisation for the submission we have received. It is an excellent submission and we are very pleased to have been able to refer to it before this morning. Would you like to make a brief introductory statement before we proceed any further?

Ms Croft—I would just reinforce the synchronicity of this inquiry, because we are embarking on a similar collaborative project, and whilst ARACY has a strong preventative focus—we seek to prevent problems that impact on the wellbeing of children and youths—I think that needs to be set within the context that often the problems that are occurring are because we have not promoted the conditions that would optimise child and youth wellbeing and development. Particularly related to this inquiry are the emotional and social developmental needs for children and young people. I do not know whether you want to know a little bit about the project that we are embarked on.

CHAIR—I welcome you to add anything additional to your submission now—and relatively briefly. Then we can get into a discussion.

Ms Croft—Indeed. Stop me if I go on. This preventing youth violence project almost coincided with the establishment of this inquiry. I found it very useful to read through the submissions and transcripts that have been posted to date. Because ARACY seeks to build collaborative approaches to complex problems, we recognise that this is a very complex problem with multiple dimensions. Initially we started quite broadly: we were looking at relationships and transitions. We have honed that down to looking at disengaged youth. We commissioned a paper on disengaged youth which looked at a number of dimensions in which young people are engaging constructively or destructively at a social level. Out of that came a decision to look at community violence, hazardous drinking and, subsequently, youth violence. We have done a pathways analysis of risk and protective factors that influence the development of violent and antisocial behaviours in young people, and that is cited in our submission. That is Williams et al.

We are now embarking at breakneck speed on achieving certain outcomes by June, because we are committed under our funding agreement, which includes imminent release of a discussion paper prepared by Sheryl Hemphill, whom I believe has given evidence to this inquiry. The primary focus of that is what works and why and what does not work and why. We are doing a program audit across multiple portfolio areas. Again, I was very encouraged to see the submission of the Office for Youth, which drew on all the different activities that are going on at a government level. There is also a lot going on at a non-government, community level. We are setting up a cross-disciplinary and cross-sector strategy group of about 25 influential key

thinkers and players, who will go on a journey with us to understand the complexities of the issue through a seminar series and roundtable in June. Hopefully, we will come up with some ideas on how we can work more collaboratively to address what we believe requires a collaborative response because of the multiple factors involved.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for that. We are very grateful for that contribution. One of the questions we were going to ask you was about your violence prevention initiative that you have just spoken about, so we are very pleased that you have done that. A lot of the submissions talk about a whole-of-government approach, and I have to say that in the public hearings so far that is coming through in witness gathering as well: they are saying, as you have, there are multiple issues. ‘Whole-of-government’ is sometimes an easy catch phrase to say considering what it actually means in reality. Are you in a position to talk a little bit more about how you would see that evolving? Where do you think we could even start? How do we begin to have a whole-of-government approach? What do you mean by that?

Ms Croft—What is apparent is that there are individual factors, there are factors that occur at a family level, there are mental health issues, there are drug and alcohol issues. At a government level each of those are being addressed by discreet portfolio areas, and some excellent programs are occurring. But my perception—I am sorry, I will get to what I think could happen—is that it is fragmented and often it is not sustained, so there has to be some top-level commitment. It cannot be initiated from one government agency; it has to be a top-level commitment. I think that commitment is to the wellbeing of our children and young people, irrespective of how it manifests, whether it is in a school setting or a family setting or whatever.

What ARACY can offer, subject to our own resourcing and capacity, is that we can bring groups together—it is not just whole-of-government, it is not just residing in the government ambit—so that there is research, there is policy, there is practice, there are advocacy groups, there is the corporate sector, there is the philanthropic sector, non-government. ARACY, because it crosses over all of those sectors, has the capacity to bring people together in a neutral space. So indeed there has to be government commitment at the top level, but what we are aiming to do is to make those introductions between the different sectors and throw it over to those people to come up with solutions themselves.

CHAIR—In Melbourne a week or so ago we had an open forum with about 40 young Australians sitting around doing a bit of work with us for the first half of the day. One of the strong messages they brought out to us was, ‘Wouldn’t it be good if we could prevent it in the first place and address the issues from which some violent actions come.’ In your submission you talk about early intervention and you take it right down to tiny people, to preschoolers up. Can you talk a bit about where you see that? Just discuss that part of your submission with us. I would really like to hear you talk to us about the preschooler up thing and how you see that evolving at the moment.

Ms Croft—I am not a content expert; I have suddenly become one. A question we might ask: is why children and young people are not violent? What enables children and young people to behave in ways that are constructive to themselves and purposeful and useful in the short term and long term for society? And it would seem that part of that process is a learning process. Children learn to regulate their emotions. For example, anyone who has been exposed to two- and three-year-olds will know that, generally speaking, they do not sit down and negotiate, or

they do not consider their responses before they pull your hair or bite or scream or kick. It is an incredible premise that Richard Tremblay, the Canadian psychologist, is putting forward—that is, what we are seeing way down the line is a failure to support young people to develop the skills that will enable them not to be violent. So we have to do that with two- and three-year-olds.

But there are multiple influences throughout the developmental pathway, and so my thinking is that there is quite a lot of energy going into the very early childhood development at a policy level at the moment, but what we have identified at a critical developmental stage from the onset of puberty, when all sorts of biological influences, neurological influences and social influences are coming to bear, we almost say to those kids ‘get through it’ without recognising that that is also a very important stage to support young people in developing emotional skills: knowing how to regulate what is happening within them, knowing how to negotiate with their environment, knowing how to respect themselves, learning how to respect other people, and why. And from what I have been able to glean, we do not seem to put anywhere near enough focus on that developmental stage, which is before we are even seeing the more extreme manifestations of violence in the public domain.

Mrs MOYLAN—I was interested because, as the chair said, we had a most fascinating discussion with a very diverse group of young people last week. Some of those young people had to be removed from their homes and moved into alternative care because of violent behaviour within the home. It brings me around to thinking about the whole issue of bullying and where that leads if it is not checked or corrected. At least one of those young people last week said to me that he had learned his bullying behaviour from his father, so he carried that with him into school. I have seen in my own electorate occasionally that parents are told, ‘Don’t send your kids to school anymore because we can’t deal with the behaviour.’

I am just interested to know whether you are aware of the Aboriginal retention program that has been operating in one of the schools in my electorate. I wonder whether this might be a model to use for children with problems, particularly antisocial behaviour and bullying behaviour. The whole thing is about trying to retain young people in the school system through to the end, until they find work or go to university. It involves specialised teachers, parents and community mentors. It has had quite a degree of success. There is one set up at Swan View Senior High School, in my electorate. Just kicking these kids out of school and saying, ‘We can’t deal with you anymore,’ seems to me to be a good way to continue violence in the community at a later stage. I just wonder what your views are on how this could be dealt with.

Ms Croft—You have made a number of points. I would be very interested to learn more about the school retention program. Obviously it reinforces that it is working at multiple levels, which is what is required. But, again, it is dealing with the problem towards the end of the pathway rather than preventing us even progressing to that point. I had the opportunity in Perth recently to attend a teacher training program for a program that has been developed in Perth and is moving out across Australia. It originated with an organisation called the Game Factory. They are developing a philosophical base but simultaneously creating cooperative games which children engage in. Through the process, teachers are taught how to mediate the learning of the game. It might be that a child is excluded from the process and the group is asked to reflect on what happened then and why and how did that child feel so that they are actually learning as a

group about the skills they need, not only for their own self-esteem and how to relate to others but about how the group relates. That is very constructive.

One of the premises of this program is that a child who is violent is a hurt and damaged child. If we then punish or exclude the child—and often the child will be quite happy to be excluded from school—we are actually admitting defeat rather than addressing whatever is happening or what has happened to cause that damage and redressing the damage. If we want children to develop social skills, it seems counterintuitive to exclude them from a group that may support the development of those skills. If we exclude them from school, potentially they will seek out other people who are engaging in antisocial behaviour and it will perpetuate and reinforce the behaviour. From the early findings we have had from our discussion paper prepared by Sheryl Hemphill and Rachel Smith at the Centre for Adolescent Health, exclusionary programs are demonstrated not to be effective.

Mr CIOBO—You speak about the impact of poor parenting on children. This is consistent with evidence that we have had before in terms of the—for lack of a better term—life lessons that parents display to their children. You talk about the need for early intervention, to have positive programs and pathways in place. Can I turn to a practical aspect of that. What do you do with a child who is growing up in a home where the parents might abuse drugs, alcohol et cetera? How do you break that cycle?

Ms Croft—We are placing an enormous amount of faith in families and parents to rear healthy children, when many of those families and parents are emotionally and socially unhealthy themselves. Not only that, but families are increasingly under stress. The opportunities for families to have a high level of involvement in and direction over their children's lives are diminishing because of time factors. Again referring to this program that I attended, perhaps we need to place a much stronger emphasis on the role of schools as centres which not only teach the three Rs but also have the capacity to develop a holistic approach to learning—so we do focus on physical exercise and academic excellence but also on emotional learning, social learning and, dare I say it, spiritual dimensions of a child's development. Children potentially have the greatest exposure to schools, even relative to the time that parents are spending.

Mr CIOBO—I do not want to put too much weight on this, but this is just an anecdote. On the Gold Coast, where I am from, in a suburb that is a lower SES suburb, the local school started a breakfast program. I will pull a figure out of the air, but let us say that 20 per cent of children were turning up at primary school not having had breakfast—so they started a breakfast program. That then ceased about 12 months later because the incidence of children turning up at school who had not had breakfast had increased to 50 per cent. I hear what you are saying, but I think you will also understand the point that I am making, which is my concern that the outsourcing of these tasks actually leads to a further and more rapid decline of the values that children should be coming across in their homes. I am not saying no to your idea, but I think we should also be aware of the perverse outcome taking place. Do you have a view on that?

Ms Croft—First of all, food—nutrition—has been demonstrated to have an enormous impact on behaviour. If you have children who are not getting good nutrition, you are going to get behaviour problems at school and at home. So, if you ensure that children have a healthy breakfast—even if it means that some families say, 'Oh goody, I don't have to feed the kids anymore'—potentially you get a bigger gain than loss from that program, because if you stop the

program then the remaining kids who were not being well nourished and were coming to school and manifesting all the problems that result from not having adequate nutrition are again not being addressed.

You also made the point about transferring responsibility from families. As was suggested earlier, even though ideally it would be wonderful if all children grew up in happy, healthy families, we have abundant evidence that this is not happening. Those children are being damaged and we have an opportunity to address that damage rather than simply saying to parents, 'Pull your socks up.' If parents are struggling themselves then they need help, not only to pull their socks up but perhaps to develop some of the emotional and social skills that would enable them to be good parents.

CHAIR—In Melbourne last week when we had our 40-odd young people in the discussion—I think it is fair if I reflect it this way—these young folk had a view about the role of schools and they had a view about the role of teachers, some of it complimentary and some of it not so complimentary. In other words, they were saying that in some cases, from the experiences that a couple of them were reciting, the teachers themselves need to be able to understand their role, not so much in giving the children in question the perfect upbringing but in understanding the impact their actions may have on a situation.

They also very strongly suggested that early intervention in this process cannot involve the family. They said that, if there is a situation identified as a problematic thing for a young person or group at the school, for argument's sake, the school community, the teacher community and the family needs to be involved. I think they were alluding—and correct me if I get this wrong, whoever was there with me; I do not want to misrepresent them—to the fact that the system needs to be resourced to allow that to happen in the most positive of ways.

In other words, we should not drag the family in and say, 'Pull your socks up,' which is exactly what you are also agreeing with me on, but say, 'Can you come in and can we together as a community try and sort this situation out?' It may be that the family is fine. It may be that the child has an issue that is not related to the situation that Steve is talking about but a different one. But, whatever the situation is, there needs to be that ability to gather around and find out what is going on and to address it accordingly. I think that was a reasonably enlightened view for these young kids to have put. Between all of them, that is what they were saying.

Ms Croft—It is the collaborative approach.

CHAIR—Exactly, and it might be that there are families where there are very severe issues within the household and it might be that there are not and that the child themselves has an unidentified issue. Would you agree?

Ms Croft—Absolutely. I was reading through the transcript last night, and I think you referred to SupportLink. Is that a program in your area?

CHAIR—Yes, that is a thing here in the ACT.

Ms Croft—That is certainly a line that ARACY is pursuing in terms of the child protection issues so that no matter where a problem is identified in the system we can work together to

address it. If a parent presents with a drug and alcohol problem or a mental health problem, that child is at risk, quite apart from needing to deal with the parent's problem, and that is true no matter where they present in the system. But the influences are multilevel. A child does not live in a vacuum, but a school is a very dominant part of their experience. As a society, I should not say we have some control over that environment but potentially we have the capacity to make that environment as positive and healthy as possible. We have less capacity to control what happens in family life.

Mr SIMPKINS—This is a subject which comes up every time I go to a school, particularly the schools in the low-socioeconomic areas of my electorate. You are from WA, aren't you?

Ms Croft—Yes. Oh, you are part of the politician adoption scheme.

Mr SIMPKINS—Yes. Girrawheen and Koondoola are challenging areas. It is always a subject that comes up: the positive influence of teachers and the school. The kids are there six hours a day and then they go back to another environment. As you say, children are not in a vacuum. How do they fight through in a family? How do they be successful in a family when parents can—not in very many cases but in a very small number of cases, I hope—prioritise themselves, whether it is a drug addiction, an alcohol addiction or something like that? How can a child fight through and be a success when everything is going against them?

Ms Croft—Well, they cannot, can they? They are too vulnerable.

Mr SIMPKINS—So there is another way, isn't there?

Ms Croft—There must be, but the other thing is—was it in WA or somewhere else?—that they were talking about extending school hours for underperforming kids. Some kids go to boarding school and have a controlled environment morning, noon and night and we do not say, 'Isn't it dreadful that kids are sent to boarding school?' Maybe we need to ensure that there are opportunities within that school community hub for after-school programs, to limit opportunities when children are exposed to very damaging situations.

Mr SIMPKINS—You see sorts of things whereby they will have breakfast programs in the morning and then there will be sporting clubs in the afternoon. These are all very positive things when you are up against a child not having that continuum of support. To me there is certainly a case for more foster caring.

Ms Croft—It is difficult. I was thinking about the other alternative where parents are working long hours and children are in child care and then are in after-school care but I guess they would in be more well to do families with two parents, but then I suppose there are single parents working long hours. In electorates like yours perhaps both parents might be unemployed so the child goes home and spends a lot more time in the family situation than if the parents were in the workforce.

Mr SIMPKINS—I agree with what you say as to how schools could always be a very positive environment—before and after school. I think there are a number of family circumstances where the parents have almost self-inflicted problems. I am not a great fan of

drugs or anything like that. I still think that fundamentally it is self-inflicted and then that gets transferred on to children. I think children are better off not being in that environment 24/7.

Ms Croft—I guess the thing is a vicious circle because those parents probably had all sorts of damaging experiences that led them onto that path so that they did not respect themselves and they did not care for themselves. Where do you intervene to make the greatest impact? If we can teach our next generation of children how to regulate their emotions, how to respect themselves and how to respect other people, then surely they are going to be better parents when their time comes.

Mr SIMPKINS—Absolutely.

Ms Croft—So it seems to me that here we have a critical stage of development, at 10 to 14, and we have an opportunity to intervene to prevent all sorts of adverse outcomes further down the line—not only that but potentially we might prevent the next generation of children being exposed to abuse.

CHAIR—Some of the evidence suggests that if a child gets into bullying behaviour at school and that is not curtailed in any successful way they will head off into further damaging behaviour as they go through their older teens. Do you have a view about that? Is there any research that you have on that?

Ms Croft—I have not got evidence on that. I am sure there is. I was reading something—I think the Australian Institute of Criminology had cited some data on that—about that. Following this tragic event in Queensland there have been all sorts of media coverage.

CHAIR—Yes, there has been.

Ms Croft—I would draw your attention to ARACY's e-bulletin that we put out every week for members and which lists media coverage on a whole range of topical issues. I looked up some of the stuff in the aftermath of that. John Marsden is apparently a teen fiction author. I do not know him. He was quoted as saying—

CHAIR—He is a young person's author.

Ms Croft—Right. He believes Australian schools are now more peaceful than ever despite the stabbing death. He was talking about his experience at school. When I reflect on my own experience at school, I recall bullying was part and parcel of my public school education but perhaps not as vicious and perhaps not as technologically supported. It seems to be a dimension of the way in which young people find their group and find out who is in the 'in group' and who is in the 'out group' and who is 'cool' and who is not. I know of people whom I went to school with who were bullies. I have met them at school reunions. They are fine upstanding citizens and very embarrassed about their childhood behaviour. I do not know of the evidence; I am sorry.

CHAIR—The other question is, again, about our young folk from last week and their use of modern technology to transmit. The instance I used at the time is the infamous example that happened a year or so back, where two or three young girls were having a fight which was filmed on a mobile phone. Sadly, it made the TV news because it got onto YouTube. The mother

of one of the girls was there as well on the sidelines urging her on. She was yelling, 'Break her head,' or whatever. I think it is fair to say that there is a lot of concern amongst some sections of the younger population about this. Have you done any work on that yet? Is any being done on the perception of the use of technology in this way?

Ms Croft—It is an uncontrolled influence.

CHAIR—I do not know that that proves that there is more violence, but it certainly shows up some violence more easily than in the past.

Ms Croft—Even on the news this morning it was about the stabbing in Queensland of a little girl, who was killed. People are hacking into sites and posting obscenities on Facebook dedications. It is of concern because what it means is that, again, mature adults used to be able to have some control over the influences to which their children were exposed, but technology is bringing an influence to bear so that it is very difficult for adults to have control. Obviously media literacy is another issue, but if we support healthy emotional and social development perhaps children will be less likely to bully online, quite apart from on an interpersonal basis, because they would develop empathic skills, concerns, considerations and respect. This is simply another means of bullying which is indicative of someone not having developed pro-social behaviour.

CHAIR—You talk a lot in your submission about evidence based policy and the research agenda. Where do you think the federal government—because that is who we are—would be best placed to focus any efforts in terms of a research agenda into this? Do you have a view on that?

Ms Croft—I think we already have an abundance of research.

CHAIR—So what do you want government to do—use it?

Ms Croft—That is right. There is an abundance of material, and our discussion paper, which will be released within the next month or so, lists most of the evidence—evaluated programs. If I can use this as a little hobby horse, I have some quite strong disability connections as well through personal experience and have done a lot of advocacy in the area. The Senate had an inquiry into the Commonwealth-state disability agreement and, of course, there was your carers inquiry. But, for the Senate inquiry, I went back through some of the inquiries that had been conducted previously, to almost exactly the same issues that were being addressed by that inquiry, and I thought, 'Well, there is some brilliant work that's been done here; if it had been implemented we wouldn't be having this current inquiry.' Similarly, as we cited in our submission, a huge amount of work has been done at a jurisdictional level, to which lots of people have made submissions and lots of recommendations have been generated. It is time for us to build onto rather than to start again. We have lots of evidence.

Ms COLLINS—What you were talking about earlier on about multilevel support is very resource and labour intensive and requires, in many cases, a lot of specialists—allied health services, mental health services, alcohol and drug services, counsellors et cetera. Do you think the reason governments have not acted in the past is that there is not the workforce or the money to support it? What is the impediment, do you think, to governments not acting if they have had

all this evidence for a long time? Why aren't we doing anything? I would like your personal view.

Ms Croft—I think it is the way in which politics is structured. Again, harking back to the disability issue, there was an inquiry done brilliantly in 1996. I rang up the author, Anna Yeatman, who had done the first inquiry and I said, 'What happened?' and she said, 'Nothing; there was a change of government.' So the political cycle in itself is problematic and, also I guess, the political perception: if the opposition has come up with the idea, it cannot be a good idea so we lose continuity of approach.

Nevertheless, it does require a major investment, but we are spending money all over the place in a piecemeal fashion and not being effective. If you were coordinated we might find it is not quite as expensive as it appears to be and it would have more impact not only at that stage but we would save a lot of money further down the line not only in terms of preventing problems but enhancing the productive capacity of the young people, who would then be contributing to our society. If we do not address this issue—and we are talking about the ageing of the population—we will lose a substantial number of people who could be making a worthwhile contribution to society.

CHAIR—It is a very important and relevant point to make. Luke is now smiling because he thinks we are going to adopt all of the opposition's ideas.

Mr SIMPKINS—I can't imagine.

CHAIR—Deirdre, thank you so much for making the trek across. I hope you are having time to do other things while you are here.

Ms Croft—I am—I am meeting up with a lot of Canberra bureaucrats ,and in Melbourne there is a national alliance for action on alcohol.

CHAIR—That is something that we did not ask you that we could have: your perception of the role of alcohol in this. We might be in touch with you again at some point, if we need to go back across any of this.

Ms Croft—I think there is an opportunity for me to learn from what you are doing.

CHAIR—Watch this space. Thank you very sincerely for the submission which is, as I said at the outset, an excellent submission. It is very thought provoking and it gives a lot of very direct information for us. Thank you.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Simpkins**):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 11.22 am