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The Secretary
House Standing Committee on Family, Community,
   Housing and Youth
PO Box 6021
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA  ACT  2600

Dear Committee Secretary

### Inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians

I respond to the invitation to provide a submission to the Inquiry and offer the following comments in relation to the Terms of Reference.

At the outset, I would express some concern regarding the use of 'violence' which is a broad term encompassing a range of behaviours - from bullying to slapping to rape or even death - in a variety of contexts.  More precise definitions of these variations would offer meaningful distinctions, essential for policy formulation and strategies to prioritise and address the problem.

In addition, I would also highlight that issues of 'violence' have a gendered component.  While I recognise that physical aggression by both males and females may be relatively common in young people's relationships, it is also the case that young women in domestic situations experience exceptionally high risks of violence, are more likely to be physically injured and are more likely to be afraid.  Indeed, research would indicate that 30 per cent of 19 to 20 year-old women reported they had been frightened or hurt by one or more instances of 'violence', compared to 12 per cent of young men[1].

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[1] Indermaur, D, 'Young Australians and Domestic Violence', Australian Institute of Criminology, *Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, No 195, February 2001, 4; Flood, M and Fergus, L, *An Assault on Our Future:  The impact of violence on young people and their relationships*, A White Ribbon Foundation Report, 2008, 2.

Conversely, some young men become enmeshed in a culture of violence, beyond family issues; effectively some young men enjoy a fight which can erupt even from a minor incident[2]. Statistics show that young people, especially young men, are at a greater risk than other age groups of experiencing violence. The proportion of men aged 18-24 years (19%) who reported experiencing physical assault by a male was almost five times as high as the rate for men aged 25 years and over (4%). Moreover, of men aged 18-24 years who were physically assaulted by a male, most (77%) reported being attacked by a stranger[3].

**Perceptions of violence and community safety among young Australians**

- Community violence is an important social issue, since the level of social integration within a community can affect rates of youth violence.
- Furthermore, research reveals a cyclical correlation between violence and the destruction of social capital or community integration which then increases the likelihood of violent behaviour, particularly among young people[4].
- Similarly, the culture or the norms and values of a society can also influence the level of violence by sanctioning violence as a normal means of resolving conflicts.
- In light of the above, results from a 2007 national survey of 600 children and young people give cause for alarm.
    - The data revealed that 28 per cent were concerned that they might be hurt by an adult, while 27 per cent feared becoming a victim of crime; research in *The State of Victoria's Children Report 2006* confirms that young people are more likely than adults to be victims of crime. Significantly, 40 per cent feel unsafe in public places, such as shopping centres, sporting grounds, and 27 per cent were apprehensive about using public transport[5].
    - These figures must be disquieting as young people's awareness and sensitivity to their safety and security underpin their healthy development.
- Young people, often influenced by their own experience, vary in how widespread they perceive domestic violence to be.
    - Those who witness parental domestic violence, Indigenous young people, girls and older teens see domestic violence as being more common[6].

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[2] Cameron, M, 'Young Men and Violence Prevention', Australian Institute of Criminology, *Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, No 154, June 2000, 2.

[3] 'Risk taking by young people' in *Australian Social Trends 2008*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, http://www.acys.info/youth_facts_and_stats/bullying_and_violence/violence

[4] 'Community Violence Among Young People: a research report', TNS Social Research, June 2007, p 1; Krug, EG *et al*, Eds, *World report on violence and health*, Geneva, World Health Organization, 2002, 36.

[5] Tucci, J, Mitchell, J and Goddard, C, 'Children's sense of safety: children's experiences of childhood in contemporary Australia', Australian Childhood Foundation, 2008, p. 8, 9, 16.

[6] Indermaur, D, 'Young Australians and Domestic Violence', 4.

- o Even so, research would indicate that one quarter of all Australian young people, between 12 and 20 years, have witnessed physically violent behaviour towards their mother or stepmother[7].
- Violence-supportive attitudes and standards are linked to wider social norms relating to gender and sexuality, as well as constructions of a hierarchy of masculinity[8].

## Links between illicit drug use, alcohol abuse and violence among young Australians

- There are complex but strong statistical relationships between alcohol consumption and crimes of violence in most western countries.
- Alcohol is often described as 'disinhibiting' which helps explain its association with street disorder, crime and violence.
  - o However, other situational factors combine to trigger violent incidents, such as: perceived loss of control in personal relationships; crowded, poorly designed venues; or inept refusal of entry or service.
- Studies based mainly on men reveal that feelings about power and control also help link intoxication and violent incidents. Research in the United States shows that men drink primarily to feel stronger and that alcohol increases thought of social and personal power.
- In western society, alcohol is associated with exemption from some of the rules and standards of normal social behaviour, drunkenness often providing an acceptable means of avoiding personal or legal responsibility[9].
- Effectively, some men may use 'being drunk' or 'being high' to minimise their own responsibility for such violent behaviour[10].
- Accordingly, drug and alcohol abuse increases the risk of fighting and youth engaging in violence, with drunkenness an important immediate factor that can frequently trigger violence[11].
- Similarly, having friends who use drugs has been correlated with violent behaviour[12].
- In the recent spate of serious assaults in Melbourne, alcohol seems to have been the common catalyst for violence, although it was also acknowledged that those situational factors cited above also came into play, such as the demeanour of security staff, lighting, seating, as well as the ready availability of alcohol itself.

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[7] Tucci, J et al, 'Children's sense of safety, p. 15.

[8] Flood, M, 'Why Violence Against Women and Girls Happens, and How To Prevent It', *Redress: Journal of the Association of Women Educators*, 2007, 16.

[9] 'Alcohol and Violence - What's the connection?', Alcohol & Public Health Research Unit, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, University of Auckland, New Zealand. http://www.aphru.ac.nz/hot/violence.htm

[10] 'Understanding Youth Violence Fact Sheet', 2009, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention

[11] Krug, EG et al, Eds, *World report on violence and health*, 31.

[12] Krug, EG et al, Eds, *World report on violence and health*, 34.

## The relationship between bullying and violence on the wellbeing of young Australians

- My concern is that use of the term 'bullying' hides the real character and lessens the gravity and harm of behaviour that may in fact constitute sexual harassment or even physical assault.
- Estimates of the frequency of bullying show wide variations again, in part, because of the lack of a precise definition. Even so, more recent information would indicate that bullying has been misjudged both in its extent and severity[13].
- What data is available would seem to suggest that incidence of bullying in Australia is at a relatively high level by world standards[14].
- More than half of children in a 2007 national survey – 57 per cent – reported that they were worried about being bullied[15].
- Physical fighting and bullying are common, with the most reliable data indicating that 1 in 6 children experience bullying on a weekly basis[16].
- Research has shown that, apart from physical harm, bullying can lead to long-term mental health problems such as anxiety and depression which must raise concerns for our young people.

## Social and economic factors that contribute to violence by young Australians

- The 'cycle of violence' thesis argues that learned behaviour from a person's upbringing is a major cause of domestic violence, both as perpetrator and as victim.
  - This 'cycle', combined with social marginalisation, may have the consequence of violence clustering in disadvantaged areas[17].
  - It is vital, therefore, that any intervention and policy formulation tackle this intergenerational transmission of violence.
- While individual characteristics such as hyperactivity, impulsiveness, poor behavioural control, attention problems and limited education feature prominently, the community - family, friends and peers - also contribute to aggressive and violent behaviour.
  - Familial influence is the strongest during childhood, and friends and peers become significantly more important during adolescence[18].
- Parental behaviour and the family environment are central causes of violent behaviour in young people and include:
  - Lower socioeconomic status of the family and poverty in the community.
  - Poor supervision, neglect and severe physical punishment.
  - Parental conflict in early childhood.

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[13] Kids Help Line, 2004, in Tucci, J *et al*, 'Children's sense of safety, p.30.

[14] Rigby, K, 'What children tell us about bullying in schools', *Children Australia,* 1997, v 22, n.2, pp 28-34.

[15] Tucci, J *et al*, 'Children's sense of safety, p. 8.

[16] Rigby, K, in Tucci, J *et al*, 'Children's sense of safety, p. 30.

[17] Indermaur, D, 'Young Australians and Domestic Violence', 4, 6.

[18] Krug, EG *et al*, Eds, *World report on violence and health*, 33, 'Understanding Youth Violence Fact Sheet', 2009, www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention

- o Low levels of family cohesion.
- o Single parent families.
- o A mother who had her first child at an early age, eg as a teenager.
- o A mother's low educational levels.
- o Having delinquent friends has also been associated with violence in young people[19].

- Several research studies have identified links between tolerance of violence and pornography. Given the Australian evidence that growing numbers of boys and young men use X-rated video pornography and Internet pornography on a regular basis, this may further contribute to violent youth behaviour[20].

**Strategies to reduce violence and its impact among young Australians**

- At the outset, the scale of the problem, the level of youth violence, should be defined.
- Any measures and strategies to reduce violence must be implemented 'early', ie stop violence before it starts.
- Implementation of pre-school enrichment programs that foster the skills essential for further success at school have been seen to raise achievement and self-esteem.
- Taking that further, social development programs that promote social and competency skills have been reported from overseas research as being among the most effective in reducing antisocial behaviour and violence, especially when provided in pre-school and the primary schooling years [21].
- Other programs that have been shown to have significant long-term effects in reducing antisocial behaviour, some of which currently exist in Australia, include
  - o Home visiting
  - o Training in parenting
  - o Mentoring programs.
- Districts or neighbourhoods where risk factors are concentrated should be identified and targeted by implementing strategies relevant to those disadvantaged communities[22].
- Prevention programs should be culturally specific and appropriate, and be delivered not only to young people in school, but also homeless young people, those living in poverty or on welfare, teenage mothers and young people under protective services care.
  - o The provision of extracurricular activities such as sports and recreation, music and drama – again tailored and appropriate to specific community needs – should therefore be promoted.

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[19] Krug, EG et al, Eds, *World report on violence and health*, 33-34.
[20] Flood, M and Fergus, L, *An Assault on Our Future*, 27.
[21] Krug, EG et al, Eds, *World report on violence and health*, 40.
[22] Indermaur, D, 'Young Australians and Domestic Violence', 6.

- Interventions should be linked to programs related to overcoming drug and alcohol abuse, as well as those that foster Indigenous young people's return to, or continuation of, secondary or tertiary education[23].
- Given the links between alcohol and violence, reduction in the availability of alcohol might be considered.
- Reducing poverty in urban areas and minimising economic or social barriers to development are fundamental principles that should underpin future policy in this area.

Significantly, some contend that young people, with their heightened sensitivity to communal attitudes, serve as a barometer for our society[24]. Since significant numbers of young people have expressed concerns for their safety, in our very own community, we need to examine the issues and structures that have generated these concerns. Appropriate evidence-based strategies to address the complex interaction of the multitude of factors at the individual, family, community and societal level should then be implemented.

Yours sincerely

Bob Such MP JP
**Member for Fisher**

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[23] Flood, M and Fergus, L, *An Assault on Our Future*, 30-31.
[24] Frederico M *et al*, *Growing Up in Australia: The Role of Parents in Promoting Positive Adolescent Development*, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra, in Tucci, J *et al*, 'Children's sense of safety, p. 26.