



STANDING COMMITTEE
ON
22 OCT 2009
FAMILY, COMMUNITY,
HOUSING & YOUTH

Submission No. 16
(Youth Violence)
A.O.C. Date: 22/10/09



20 October 2009

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

RE: Inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians

The OUTthere, Rural Victorian Youth Council for Sexual Diversity has prepared a brief submission for the current Inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians.

The submission reflects on examples of homophobic violence some of our council members and other young people associated with the OUTthere council have experienced.

Yours sincerely

Kat Ettwell

Chairperson
OUTthere, Rural Victorian Youth Council for Sexual Diversity

Introduction

This submission is being lodged by OUTthere, Rural Victorian Youth Council for Sexual Diversity. Members of this council are aged 16 – 25 and are nominated representatives of nine different sexual diversity groups based in towns across rural Victoria. The OUTthere council is a gay straight alliance and aims to raise awareness, advocate and provide information and resources to communities, youth services and government departments about issues facing same-sex attracted youth in rural Victoria.

OUTthere is an initiative of WayOut, Rural Victorian Youth and Sexual Diversity Project. WayOut is a youth suicide prevention project targeting same sex attracted and transgender young people (SSATYP) across rural Victoria. It aims to raise awareness of the needs of these young people and the nature and effects of homophobia and transphobia. The WayOut project has been externally evaluated by the Australian Research centre in Sex, Health & Society and received the 2004 Victorian Government Public Health award for Innovation in the capacity building category. The WayOut project is based at Cobaw Community Health Service and is co-managed by Gay & Lesbian Health Victoria. Further information about WayOut and OUTThere can be found at www.wayout.org.au

Experiences of violence by young people involved in WayOut and OUTThere

Members of the OUTthere, Rural Victorian Youth Council for Sexual Diversity and members of the Macedon Youth (MY) WayOut Group shared their personal experiences and their experiences of witnessing homophobic violence.

"I was discriminated against at school. I had people throw things at me, including lunches that had been saved especially to throw. I was ostracised, I attempted suicide and eventually had to change schools because of what was happening. No one ever did anything about what happened, which left me feeling sad and alone."

-Female 16 years old

"I was subjected to homophobic behaviour and bullying all through my first years at school. Eventually I changed schools thinking the attitudes would be different towards sexuality and I would not have to hide myself or fear homophobic bullying. However, as soon as I started at the new school, rumours were already spreading about me any one who was associated with me. This went on for the entire year, and on one of the last days of school I was physically attacked by another girl. Whilst the violent attack was horrible, I was so severely hurt by the ongoing abuse throughout the year, I told teachers about the abuse and I was told to 'take it outside'. Nothing ever happened about it apart from both me and the other girl getting suspended for a few days."

-Female 17 years old

"Even though I am straight I have been verbally and physically abused just for having friends who are gay. People think that I am a lesbian just because I am a part of a gay straight alliance youth group. I don't really care what people think about me, I am proud to be a part of the MY WayOut Group and the OUTthere council the work we do. I joined these groups because I witness a lot of abuse and bullying towards classmates because of their sexuality and I wanted that to stop. I think things have improved in my community because of the work we do, but not enough for my friends to feel safe about 'coming out' openly."

-Female 18 years old

"I began to question my sexuality when I was still in primary school, however after witnessing 2 extremely homophobic attacks in my small community I decided to try and forget and ignore my feelings, as I the people in my community gave me the impression that being a lesbian was wrong and I did not want the same violence to happen to me or my family. The longer I tried to ignore my feelings the harder it was. By the time I was 12 I was getting treated for depression and anxiety, and soon began self harming. When I was 14 I attempted suicide and was sent to a youth psychiatric ward to deal with my depression. I was never comfortable to talk about my sexuality and my fears at the ward, or with my counsellor after I was released. It was only when I joined the WayOut group when I was 17, that I was able to accept within myself that being a lesbian was not

wrong, and it was ok to have the thoughts and feelings I had, and most importantly that I was not alone. I still live in the same small community, and whilst I feel ok about my sexuality I still fear that I will be a victim of violence if people knew. I live in fear and hide my sexuality from my community."

-Female 25 years old

"In primary school all the kids would say that gay men are all 'faggots and poofs' and that they all die from AIDS. I knew at that stage that I was gay but how could I tell my friends if they felt that way. When I did come out when I was 13 I was bullied and harassed every minute of every day, violence was no stranger, getting thrown into lockers, beaten up in the toilets and once my hair was set on fire. The school never did anything to address this or my own safety. If this happened in a public place those people would be charged with assault, by why can you get away with it in schools?"

-Male 19 years old

Violence effects us at school, at home, down the street, in the workplace and at social events.

The OUTthere Council identified that addressing homophobia in rural schools is a priority area and have developed a project to address this issue. Currently the OUTthere council is conducting on-line surveys for young people, teachers and workers in rural Victorian Secondary schools about their experiences of homophobia. The surveys asks a range of questions about bullying, harassment, school policies and support. The information taken from these surveys will be developed into a report with recommendations and presented to the department of education.

The rural groups are continually developing projects in their local communities to raise awareness about sexual diversity and the effects of homophobia and help create safe and inclusive spaces for all young people free from homophobia and discrimination, as well as providing support for the local young people.