

Submission No. 27

(Youth Violence)

A.O.C. Date: 23/10/2009



Parliamentary Inquiry.

Strategic Response to Combating Street Violence.

The following terms of reference will be addressed in this submission:

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

Introduction

We formed Step Back Think after our close friend; James Macready-Bryan was brutally bashed in Bourke Street Mall on the night of his 20th birthday in October 2006. James didn't quite die but his brain was damaged beyond repair and he was left in a twilight zone where he is neither dead nor alive.

In creating Step Back Think we aimed to target Melbourne's escalating culture of street violence. The group is not against drinking or partying, just the violence that often goes with it. And there can be no denying that the frequency and intensity of violence – including the willingness of people to attack police; to carry and use weapons; to commit violence in gangs and to kick victims repeatedly after they've gone to the ground – has reached disturbing new levels.¹

Step Back Think understands that the problem of public violence is an extremely complex issue, which requires in-depth research and consideration of the role that education, the media, drugs and alcohol, technology, policing and the regulation of licensed venues play in relation to our violent culture.

Step Back Think, with the assistance of others,² have formulated what we hope are original and effective approaches to combat street violence in some of these key areas.

In our response, we have divided the strategies into two groups which we have termed:

- **1. Mechanics** – referring to practical, short term reform. Will include some discussion and proposals in relation to:
 - (i) Venue Licensing**
 - (ii) Transport**
 - (iii) Shared Spaces**

- **2. Culture** – referring to strategies that aim to shift attitudes and behaviors in the long term in the areas of:
 - (i) Education**
 - (ii) Community Led Responses**
 - (iii) Alcohol and Other Illicit Drugs**

¹Eckersley, Richard, *Australia 21. Violence in Public Places*, p9. Hospitalisations for those aged 12-24 increased 27% in Aus between 1996 and 2006. Also Professor Andrew Kaye has provided evidence that there have been large increases in serious head injuries as a result of assaults.

² Particularly the research of *Australia 21* see above.

1. Mechanics

We began using the term ‘mechanics’ based on the concept that the city is a working machine. Environmental aspects and physical characteristics of the city will be considered under this heading.

(i) Venue Licensing

Deregulation of licensed premises in the CBD, following the Federal Government’s competition policy of the 1990s, led to a massive increase in the number of licensed premises in Melbourne. The number now stands at over 1000 and the number of licensed venues that operate after 3am in greater Melbourne has increased from 55 to 156 in three years. Of particular concern are the venues termed “monster venues” which cater to over 1000 patrons at a time.³ The deregulation policy called on the state governments to relax regulatory burdens and consequently has seen commercial development take precedent over public health and harm minimization concerns.

Proposal:

Step Back Think does not intend to be involved in regulation of licensed venues as such, however, our *Rate Your Venue* website, discussed below, will address some of the issues of accountability of venues highlighted here.

It is the view of Step Back Think that the current policies in place surrounding liquor licensing need to be independently reviewed.

(ii) Transport

Over 300,000 people head into the CBD every Friday and Saturday night and the issue of transport continues to be problematic. Public transport stops hours before venues close and for many people the only way to get home is by taxi.

Taxi ranks are rare and patrons are often refused service because their fare is apparently insufficient. Thousands of people are forced to squabble over taxis and mill around in the city late at night, sometimes for hours.

Public transport is limited after midnight and as a result, train stations become isolated places. A cycle ensues as stations have a reputation for being unsafe places. This drives the number of commuters down, meaning transport companies cannot justify running late night services.

Proposal

A hotline for patrons to report problem taxis by their number plates. This would obviously leave drivers open to the wrath of jaded patrons, however, if many reports come back over the same taxi then action can be taken. This could also coincide with an increased fine for this type of behavior, although the main function of the initiative is to act as a deterrent against refusals rather than as a punitive measure.

³ Eckersley, R, *Violence in Public Places*, p11.

(iii) Shared Spaces

Foot traffic around the CBD is often low and the number of people on the street traveling from venue to venue is restricted to select pockets, leaving long stretches of darkness and seclusion. These are prime areas for violent confrontations and leave small groups vulnerable.

Proposal

Create a central traffic free zone for the CBD to allow mall like walkways along the main city arteries. Encourage live music, food stalls and good lighting increasing the public or community feeling in the streets and offering a low key festival atmosphere.

The by-product of this proposal is a perimeter of vehicle traffic and taxis, so that people only have to walk a few blocks to the radius of the CBD or CND (Central Night District) to have a range of transport options.

2. Cultural Change

Step Back Think has had a particular focus on the cultural change associated with violence. Violence is based in culture and human nature and we will encourage people to reflect on beliefs and values in regards to violence. Change, if it comes, will be slow and can only stem from young people, who are the demographic responsible for street violence.

Research has shown that the target group largely responsible for street violence (15-26 year old males) does not respond well to consequential type messages. For this reason alternative approaches, which address fundamental social issues and promote an anti-violence message in new ways, are vital in the bid for cultural change. What's more, we believe that the problem of aggression and violence is not merely a consequence of binge drinking and drug taking – although these factors obviously contribute. Cultural change is not a short term prospect but, like social issues of smoking and drink driving, we believe it is possible to transform community attitudes towards certain behaviours.

(i) Alcohol and Illicit Drugs

Step Back Think believe that in most cases alcohol and illicit drugs act as a facilitator for street violence rather than as the principal cause, which stem from existing social and cultural problems. Alcohol and illicit drugs when compared with cultural change area convenient policy target and mask the core problems. The scarcity of research in this area makes it difficult to support this opinion. However recent examples of extreme violence at an under 16s rugby league grand final in NSW and the Australian school principals report indicate that violence is a cultural problem rather than a result of binge drinking and illicit drug use.

(ii) Education

Through a growing youth culture of technology and mobile communication, young people are more connected to the rest of the world than at any other time in history. With these new technologies comes a new set of rules about the etiquette and social expectations of peer relationships. Recent research into *Violence in Public Places*, led by Richard Eckersley and Australia 21, has tentatively shown that trends in violent behaviour could be attributed to a decline in respect and empathy amongst the younger generation. This could also be associated with increasing individualism – possibly a by-product of technology and consumerist culture – as well as perceptions of violence as the norm and a rise in ambition that results in a feeling of increased pressure to work harder but also to “play” harder.

There is very little information out there for young people about the vulnerability of the human brain and body in relation to street fights and the damage that just one punch can inflict. Compounding these issues is a lack of real communication with young people about their own experiences and beliefs and a dearth of guidance in providing real-life skills for dealing with confronting situations during a night out.

The Proposal

Step Back Think's peer-to-peer education program – at this stage with the working title of “No Regrets” – aims to curb the culture of violence in Australia by addressing the underlying social problems outlined above. Over the past 12 months we've created a layered program

with the help of the Department of Early Education and Childhood Development and the Foundation for Young Australians. The pilot program for ten eastern region schools was launched at Balwyn High School last week. It targets years 9 to 12, with a focus on peer leadership and giving ownership of the problem to students. With the help of a number of volunteers and members of Step Back Think, “No Regrets” enables students to come up with ideas and methods for addressing issues of violence and problems of disrespect. It gives them the opportunity to think about ways of dealing with confrontational situations and aims to dispel myths over issues of violence, drugs and alcohol and the ability to make your own decisions.

Life is confusing for young men today. They are supposed to be sensitive, fashionable and successful but also a “man” when called on, who will stand up for his mates and his women. These mixed cultural signals – from parents, friends, movies, TV etc – need to be addressed at an early age. Our education program aims to do this through techniques such as encouraging students to speak about street violence. Empirical evidence suggests that teenage girls find it disgusting and unappealing, providing a powerful incentive for teenage boys to avoid violent encounters. Other methods would include teaching non-violent techniques for helping out friends and providing students with the skills to deal with potentially dangerous situations.

If it is deemed to be successful at a pilot level, this program has the capability to be rolled out across the country and reach significant numbers of young people at a critical age.

(iii) Community led Responses

Step Back Think has had fantastic support from governments and organizations across the country for one reason: we have personally experienced the devastations of violence and have acted on behalf of young people to say ‘something needs to change’.

We feel that community based responses to this issue are very powerful. However, there needs to be specific solutions for specific problems. The kind of strategies that Step Back Think brings to Melbourne will differ to the response needed in Sydney, and differ again from other regional centers.

There are many groups of people, family and friends, who have experienced the effects of violence and it is critical that these people are encouraged to take a stand in their community and are supported in their efforts.

The “Rate Your Venue” Proposal

Over the last 12 months Step Back Think have worked with Grey advertising to develop an interactive “Rate Your Venue” website, which aims to hold Melbourne’s licensed venues accountable and assist patrons in making informed decisions about where they go out. Marketed as a gig guide this website would provide information about live music, good food, events and promotions, while also offering a safety rating based primarily on patron feedback but also on Victorian police statistics. The website would tackle, amongst other things, information about whether bouncers are “male friendly” or unnecessarily violent at

a particular venue, the street lighting, how long queues tend to be and whether it's easy to get transport (particularly taxis) to and from a venue.

This concept is specific to licensed venues but the general idea is applicable in other ways. It requires a community to take responsibility for effectively self-regulating and in doing so stand up for what they think is appropriate and what they will accept.

The AFL Victoria Proposal

Step Back Think has had numerous meetings with the AFL who have pledged their support for our anti-violence cause. In 2010 we plan to use the influential power of football and the administrative abilities of the AFL to promote a single anti-violence round in all metropolitan leagues in Melbourne – and hopefully all country leagues in Victoria as well – to coincide with an anti-violence AFL game. It would include having an information pack with a DVD and other promotional gear (maybe rub on tattoos) sent out to the clubs, and each league record having a section devoted to addressing the key issues around street violence. This community based approach targets football clubs, which are arguably at the core of fostering social myths including that sticking up for your mate involves punching someone and a 'boys will be boys' excuse for violence.