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

Inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comment to this important inquiry. The negative impact of violence on children and young people is of serious concern to me as Commissioner for Children and young People in Western Australia. This inquiry offers an opportunity for Parliament to conduct a thorough assessment of the strategies and services needed to prevent and reduce this problem and to inform the further development of Australia's strategic approach to this issue. I am pleased to offer comment and would be happy to provide further information as required.

Role of the WA Commissioner for Children and Young People

I was appointed as Western Australia's inaugural Commissioner for Children and Young People in December 2007 pursuant to the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006* (the Act).

The role of the Western Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People is one of broad advocacy—under the Act, I have responsibility for advocating on behalf of the half a million Western Australian citizens under the age of 18 and for promoting and monitoring their wellbeing. I must always observe and promote the right of children and young people to live in a caring and nurturing environment and to be protected from harm and exploitation. One of the guiding principles of the Act is the recognition that parents, families and communities have the primary role in safeguarding and promoting the wellbeing of their children and young people and should be supported in that role.

In performing all functions under the Act, I am required to have regard to the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, and the best interests of children and young people must be my paramount consideration. I must also give priority to, and have special regard to, the interests and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

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children and young people, and to children and young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged for any reason.

Perceptions of violence and community safety among young Australians

Perceptions of safety do not always align with actual risk. Mostly perception of risk regarding personal safety and levels of violence in the community is greater than the actual risk. Interestingly, young people are more likely to underestimate the level of risk of violence to themselves[1] and this presents challenges in communicating personal safety messages effectively.

That young people do identify personal safety as a significant concern in the 2008 Survey of Young Australians[2] is not however an unfounded fear. Young people aged 15 – 24 experience significantly higher rates of assault, sexual assault, kidnapping and robbery than any other age group[3]. Children aged 0 – 14 had the second highest rates of sexual assault and kidnapping (after the 15 – 24 year age group). A report by the Australian Childhood Foundation[4] who surveyed 600 children aged 10 – 14 found that 28% were actively concerned that they could be hurt by an adult and 57% were worried about being bullied.

In addition, the number of children taken into care for protection has more than doubled over the last decade and it is estimated that in 2005, 25,000 children in Western Australia were present at family and domestic violence incidents.[5] Added to this is the knowledge that much of the figures relating to assault, sexual assault and domestic violence are very much under reported.

Importantly, Aboriginal children and young people fare much worse across all of these domains. Aboriginal people are significantly more likely to be victims of assault, sexual assault and murder than non-Aboriginal people[6] and are significantly over represented in the child protection system.

Young people are also the perpetrators of violence. A study by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)[7] reported that 14.5% of boys and 3.1% girls in year 6 had engaged in violent behaviour in the last 12 months. Reports also indicate that young people are also, at times, the perpetrators of violence within families towards both parents and siblings.

While responding to this issue with due seriousness it is also important to remember that the overwhelming majority of children and young people are not involved in violence either as victims or perpetrators. Overstating the risks can potentially lead to an increased risk for children and young people if they disengage from the community through fear of becoming victims or are further marginalised by the adult community

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[1] Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003 Australian Social Trends 2003 – Crime and Justice: Crime victimisation and feelings of safety. ABS cat. No. 4102.0
[2] Mission Australia 2008 Survey of Young Australians
[3] Above ABS 2003
[4] Tucci J, Mitchell J & Goddard C (2008) Children's Sense of Safety: Children's experiences of childhood in contemporary Australia. Australian Childhood Foundation, Victoria.
[5] Mann J (2007) Family and Domestic violence in Western Australia: Building a profile of those involved. WA Police Department
[6] Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003 Australian Social Trends 2003 – Crime and Justice: Crime victimisation and feelings of safety. ABS cat. No. 4102.0
[7] Williams J, Toumbourou J, Williamson E, Hemphill S, Patton G (2009) Violent and antisocial behaviours among young adolescents in Australian communities: An analysis of risk and protective factors. ARACY.

through fear of them perpetrating violence. The role of community engagement as a protective factor is discussed later in this submission.

Link between illicit drug use, alcohol abuse and violence

The link between violence and particularly alcohol use is well demonstrated through a range of research and statistics even in the 10 – 14 year old age group. The ARACY study reported that, " Young people who had ever consumed alcohol, or consumed alcohol in the previous month, were approximately three and a half times more likely to have been violent in the previous year" and "among those who engaged in binge drinking in the previous two weeks, the likelihood of having been violent was more than five times higher". The nexus between alcohol use and vulnerability to violence and other forms of personal violation is of particular concern. In a recent report[8] 19% of female and 12% of male secondary school age students reported having unwanted sex because they were 'too drunk'. Alarmingly this trend seems to be increasing, consistent with increases in risky levels of alcohol consumption in young people, particularly young women.

Risk factors for engaging in risky drinking behaviours include community, school, family and individual factors. Young people's alcohol consumption does need to be seen in the context of drinking patterns more broadly in Australia. Efforts to prevent the uptake by young people of hazardous or harmful patterns of drinking will not succeed if we do not address the culture of drinking that exists in the broader community and improve efforts to reduce overall alcohol consumption.

Bullying and violence

Estimates of bullying vary considerably however calls to the Kids Help Line[9] indicate that this is one of the major concerns of children and young people. As older children particularly are less likely to tell someone about their experiences of being bullied, again it is likely that there is considerable under reporting of incidents of bullying. Of most concern is that young people predominantly report that the problem of bullying is not resolved or, more alarmingly, gets worse when they seek help from adults[10].

Social and economic factors

Statistics[11] demonstrate that unemployment and socio-economic status are strongly linked to a higher risk of experiencing violence generally and that unemployment, poverty and involvement in the juvenile justice system have been linked to higher rates of victimisation for Aboriginal people.[12]

Protective and risk factors for young people engaging in violent behaviour have been clearly identified[13] and include socio economic status, family structure and connectedness, exposure to violence and conflict, and high community mobility. Addressing these broader issues is an integral part of reducing violence in the community.

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[8] Smith A, Agius P, Mitchell A, Barrett C, Pitts M. 2009. Secondary Students and Sexual Health 2008, Monograph Series No. 70, Melbourne: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, La Trobe University.
[9] In above Tucci et al
[10] Ibid, and; Cross D, Shaw T, Hearn L, Epstein M, Monks H, Lester L, Thomas L (2009) Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study. Child Health Promotion Research Centre, Edith Cowan university. Perth.
[11] Above ABS 2003
[12] Australian Bureau of Statistics (2004) National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2002. ABS Cat. No. 4714.0
[13] Above Williams J et al

Strategies to reduce violence and its impact

Clearly the impact and underlying causes of violence on children and young people is a complex phenomena requiring an array of strategies to provide effective solutions. I believe that these strategies need to include the following key elements:

Early identification and providing support to families
Focusing efforts to support families in the early years with universal screening and information, and with targeted support for families identified with increased risk profiles is essential to improving the risk and protective factor balance for children and young people.

Improving family, school and community engagement
Strategies that improve engagement with children, young people and their communities are significant in addressing the impact of social exclusion and disengagement that often translates into violent and antisocial behaviour. More than 50% of children surveyed[14] felt that they were not made to feel welcome in public spaces and strategies that actively plan to include the positive engagement of children and young people need to be implemented.

Including the views of children and young people in developing strategies to address violence
It is important that strategies to reduce violence and bullying are measured on their effectiveness in making actual improvements to the safety and welfare of children and young people. Reports[15] identify that a fear of having mobile phones and internet access taken away prevents young people from seeking help when they are the victims of cyber-bullying. This highlights the importance of listening to, and actively involving, children and young people when we develop and implement new measures to address issues that affect them.

Addressing domestic and family violence
Efforts to reduce domestic and family violence have been the subject of considerable research and discussion. The Productivity Commissions report on Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage[16] identifies a number of promising programs that are impacting positively in this regard for the Aboriginal community. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) should endorse and implement the *Time for Action: The National Council's Plan for Australia to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2009 – 2021* as a matter of priority.

Addressing disadvantage in the Aboriginal community
The over representation of Aboriginal children and young people as victims of violence is a tragic indicator of the disadvantage experienced by our Aboriginal community. Efforts to improve this situation must be considered the top priority across all domains of service delivery and action. Particular attention should be given to improving the over representation of Aboriginal young people in the juvenile justice system through better engagement in positive activities and improved use of diversionary strategies.

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[14] Above in Tucci et al
[15] Above Cross et al and Tucci et al
[16] SCRGSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision) 2009, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2009*, Productivity Commission, Canberra.

In summary I believe the following to be critical in ensuring that Australia respond effectively to addressing the impact of violence in the community on its youngest citizens:

- Strategies and services across the spectrum of prevention, early intervention and treatment are clearly based on evidence of what works.

- The views of children and young people should be included in the development, delivery and evaluation of strategies, programs and services.

- Services are provided in a coordinated, accessible and integrated way to deal holistically with the needs of children, young people and their families and to ensure that they reach the most vulnerable members of our community.

- Services are adequately resourced to meet the objectives for which they are designed.

I welcome the opportunity to comment on these issues and would be happy to further expand on these issues as required.

Yours sincerely

MICHELLE SCOTT

Commissioner for Children and Young People WA

23 October 2009