The Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian

promoting and protecting the rights, interests and wellbeing of all Queenslanders under 18

Thank you for providing the Queensland Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian (the Commission) with the opportunity to respond to the *Inquiry into the Impact of Violence on Young Australians* (the Inquiry).

The Commission supports the Committee's examination of how to provide safe environments and communities for young Australians. As ascertaining young people's perceptions of violence and community safety among their peers is an important first step in formulating strategies to reduce violence and its impacts on young people, the Commission held three separate focus groups with young people:
- one with The Salvation Army Youth Outreach Service (YOS) education program in Lawnton, and
- two with Craigslea State High School (Craigslea SHS), in West Chermside, Brisbane.

The Commission used these focus group sessions to explore the young people's perceptions of peer violence, and has focused its feedback to the Inquiry on the first Term of Reference.

> **The Commission recommends that any strategies to reduce youth violence and its impact on young Australians:**
> 1. involve ongoing consultation with young people about how their feelings of safety can be improved, particularly given the different ways young people perceive violence and safety
> 2. take into account the range of factors that influence young people's use of violence, and
> 3. include a multi-faceted and evidence-based approach to meeting young people's needs, for example:
>   - prevention and early intervention programs, and
>   - social development programs.

1. Continuing consultation with young people is necessary to develop strategies to improve their feelings of safety

To understand the impact of violence on young Australians, consultation with young people will be essential. Participation of young people will assist in ensuring programs and services are developed in response to their needs. The Commission commends the Inquiry's focus on hearing from young people and recommends that the Committee continue to gather the views of young people as it seeks to develop strategies to improve their feeling of safety.

The perception of 'being safe' is subjective. For example, young people may feel safe, yet still perceive that their peer group is violent – as indicated by some of the young people who participated in the Commission's focus groups.

In an effort to assist the Inquiry to shed more light on how young people perceive the concepts of 'being safe' and 'violence', the Commission consulted with three groups of young people. The first group was from YOS, a program of The Salvation Army that works with young people aged between 12 and 20 years, who are at risk of homelessness, are homeless and/or are in need of support. The group was part of the YOS Education Program for young people who want to study year 10, 11 and/or 12, offered as an alternate delivery model. This focus group had six young people of five males and one female.

The second and third groups were students of Craigslea SHS. Consultation occurred with a group of six year 11 and 12 girls, and another group of three boys and three girls from across years 8, 9 and 10. The young people were asked to answer a series of questions examining their perceptions of violence and safety.

Responses to the question 'What do you think violence (or 'being violent') is?' indicated that young people each have their own understanding of violence. For some it meant a feeling like pain or fear, and for others it was a physical association, for example fights, being stabbed or getting shot. Some associated actual things like men, territory and revenge with violence.

The same individualised responses were provided in relation to 'what does safe mean?' with some young people stating that the following things make them feel safe:
- family – loving environment
- friends – stick up for you and you can trust them
- familiar places
- happy
- home
- content, and
- having a dog.

Young people across all groups found it easier to define what made them feel unsafe, rather than what 'safe' meant to them.

When asked whether they felt safe in their community, there was considerable disparity in responses from the YOS group and those from Craigslea SHS. Whilst ten of the eleven young people at Craigslea SHS stated that they did generally feel safe, the YOS group had significantly more negative responses. Young people in the YOS focus group, which assists young people at risk of homelessness, or who are homeless, had a higher exposure to unsafe or violent situations than the young people at Craigslea SHS and may explain the predominantly negative responses for the YOS group of their perceptions of violence and feeling unsafe. Specifically, all young people in the YOS group stated that they only felt safe sometimes, and expanded on this by stating the following:

- *"I don't feel safe at the train station" (YOS, Male, 16)*

- *"Or in the park at night" (YOS, Female, 16)*

- *"Me and a mate were approached by three guys at the train station who wanted to bash us for no reason" (YOS, Male, 16)*
- *"I was bashed outside Westfield's [shopping centre]" (YOS, Male, 16)*
- *"Thursday nights at the shopping centre are the worst" (YOS, Male, 16)*
- *"Bad lighting" (YOS, Female, 16)*
- *"They [local gang] intimidate and threaten you. I won't leave my house on my own" (YOS, Female, 16)*
- *"People, not just the places. It can be any time of the day and if there's someone who wants to get you, they'll just do it" (YOS, Male, 16)*

In contrast, the young people at Craigslea SHS provided the following responses about feeling unsafe and how they take steps to feel safer:

- *"I won't go to the train station at night. No one lives near train stations so if you scream no-one will hear you" (Female, 16)*
- *"My friend told me a good thing for taxis. She said you should pretend you're on the phone and when you get in the taxi, say that you'll be home in however long and the rego number of the taxi". (Female, 17)*
- *It's about common sense like, don't go to older boys houses, even just male friends". (Female, 16)*
- *"I always carry one of those alarm things when I go out so if I get attacked I can press it and it makes a loud noise" (Female, 17)*

These statements, indicate that the young people at Craigslea seem to be able to make choices about avoiding unsafe situations, whereas the responses from the YOS group tend to suggest that these young people although they feel unsafe, have fewer options in seeking to avoid violence and feel safe. As a result, they experience actual violence.

This emphasises the increased risk of exposure to violence and/or unsafe situations for at risk young people, especially those who are homeless or do not have support networks to assist them when they feel unsafe to make choices to avoid unsafe situations. This is consistent with research highlighting the increased vulnerability of homeless people to victimisation.[1]

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[1] Study by Newburn & Rock 2005, cited in *Homeless people : their risk of victimisation,* AICrime Reduction Matters no. 66, Australian Institute of Criminology 2008 found that compared with the public, homeless people were thirteen times more likely to have experienced violence and forty-seven times more likely to have been victims of theft. The study also found that few homeless people report being the victim of a crime or anti-social behaviour because of their fear of the police and the social exclusion they may perceive or experience more generally.

The Commission also asked young people whether they felt the level of violence among young Australians was generally low, medium or high. All of the young people in the YOS group felt that it was medium to high. One young person estimated that about 75% of young people in the local community were violent. Comparatively, ten young people in the Craigslea groups felt that the level of violence was medium, with only one female stating that she felt it was low in relation to her experience growing up in South Africa. It is interesting to note that whilst the YOS and Craigslea groups differed considerably in feeling safe in their community, they share similar views on the perceived levels of violence among their peers.

The young people in the YOS group, who indicated they had been exposed to actual violence, felt that as a result of these experiences, they had a heightened perception that they are not safe more often. They suggested that this was based on aspects of their local community and specific previous encounters of violence that created an expectation that they might be confronted with violence on a daily basis.

Based on the numerous ways in which young people perceive violence and safety, it will be important to continue consulting with young people, so that these differing perceptions can be considered in strategies to reduce the impact of violence.

2. Strategies to reduce violence should take into account the range of factors that influence young people's use of violence

In developing an understanding of why young people are violent, it is widely understood that a combination of individual, relational, community and societal factors will have an impact on how a young person behaves[2]. Accordingly, the Commission recommends that the Committee take into account relevant contributing factors in developing strategies to reduce violence.

Youth violence reduction is a complex, multi-faceted issue which cannot be viewed in isolation from other problem behaviours. Violent young people tend to display other problems, such as truancy, dropping out of school and substance abuse. However, not all violent young people have problems other than violence, and not all young people with problems are necessarily violent[3].

Individual factors can have an impact on a young person's involvement in violence. The World Health Organisation's 'World Report on Violence and Health'[4], suggests that young people's biological and psychological characteristics could contribute to a young person's response to particular situations. The major personality and behavioural factors that may predict youth violence are hyperactivity, impulsiveness, poor behavioural control and attention problems.

Parental or inter-generational relationships are the primary reference point many young people are exposed to in their childhood and teenage years. If parental behaviours

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[2] *World report on violence and health*, Edited by Etienne G. Krug, Linda L. Dahlberg, James A. Mercy, Anthony B. Zwi and Rafael Lozano, World Health Organization, Geneva, 2002, p.32
[3] *ibid* p.25
[4] *ibid*

reflect violence, then it is likely that a young person will be influenced by this. There is a substantial body of research examining the extent to which people who were abused as children, become abusive parents themselves. There is also evidence that other conduct such as aggression, violence and substance abuse are transmitted across generations[5].

The Commission's focus group feedback in response to the questions 'what do you think causes young people to be violent?' and 'what do you think could be done to reduce violence and its impact on young people?' demonstrate that young people recognise the influence of family in their development:

Causes of violence:

- *"Parents may have been violent" (YOS, Male, 17)*
- *"It may be the only thing they know" (YOS, Male, 16)*
- *"Parents should control these influences" (YOS, Male, 16 in relation to discussion on the influence of the media, films, games)*
- *"It's up to parents to teach kids what's right and wrong" (YOS, Male, 16)*
- *"Sometimes you don't know any other way. If your family are violent, you will be" (Craigslea, Female, 16)*
- *"Reaction to events with the family" (Craigslea, Male 14)*

Solutions to reduce violence:

- *"There should be a parents' program to support better communication with their children" (Craigslea, Female, 17)*
- *"Being able to chat stuff through with parents is really important" (Craigslea, Female)*

Peer influence should also not be underestimated in considering the perceptions of violence amongst young people. If a young person's peers are involved in violent behaviour, the impact and perceptions of violence in peers is likely to increase, as suggested by Professor Paul Mazzerole of Griffith University[6], who considers peer influences on violence to be powerful, to the extent that peers can:

- provide values/attitudes that endorse violence
- provide behavioural models supporting violence
- amplify opportunities and situations for violence, and
- accentuate levels of machismo-bravado.

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[5] *Intergenerational Transmission of Abusive Parenting Norms,* Ellen Benoit and Eloise Dunlap, National Development and Research Institutes, New York, 2006
[6] Presentation on *Youth Violence in Australia: Characteristics and Consequences*, Professor Paul Mazerolle, Griffith University, 2007

Focus group participants shared examples of situations where they or their friends had been exposed to violence. The YOS group was asked 'what do you think makes young people violent?' Peer influence featured in their responses:

- *"People egging you on" (Female, 16)*
- *"Being in a gang"*

The year 11/12 group at Craigslea SHS felt that most violence was perpetrated by males (but not exclusively) and reference was also made to an 'alpha male' or 'tough guy' image in the year 8/9/10 group. The year 8/9/10 Craigslea group felt that violence among females was more verbal and starts mostly behind your back as gossip, whilst for males, violence was more to prove a point, more physical and more about keeping your reputation. The young people also stated that:

- *"Boys fight over pointless things" (Male, 15)*
- *"Boys fight for the thrill" (Male, 14)*

The community can also impact young people's involvement in violent behaviour. For example the aforementioned WHO report states that 'generally speaking, boys in urban areas are more likely to be involved in violent behaviour than those living in rural areas. Within urban areas, those living in neighbourhoods with high levels of crime are more likely to be involved in violent behaviour than those living in other neighbourhoods'[7].

Young people in the YOS group suggested that young people regularly are either the victims or the perpetrators of violence as a result of self-protective action. The young people gave examples of gangs in the area and places in the community, such as the train station and park where they felt unsafe. These environmental and community factors influencing young people's involvement in violence are consistent with other research by the Australian Youth Forum where young people shared their concern for violence in specific locations within their communities[8].

In relation to media influences on violence, Craigslea students did not indicate any contribution of the media to violence. The young people at YOS also stated that it had little or no influence in promoting violent behaviour in them. One young person said that if he felt angry or aggressive, then he might play a violent game on his console, but would not then go out and perpetrate the same acts on others. He felt the games diverted his reaction or response to a situation rather than transfer it into action. Another young person at Craigslea SHS echoed these comments, stating that the age limit on violent games should be reduced so that people who are violent or feel aggressive can channel their frustration on a game rather than being violent to someone else.

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[7] *World report on violence and health*, Edited by Etienne G. Krug, Linda L. Dahlberg, James A. Mercy, Anthony B. Zwi and Rafael Lozano, World Health Organization, Geneva, 2002, p.34
[8] *Violence and Safety – A report on **youTH**INK findings and website discussions*, Australian Youth Forum, Australian Government, p.3-5

Given the range of factors which can contribute to young people behaving violently, strategies to reduce violence among young people should be based on a consideration of how to address such factors.

3. Reducing youth violence requires a multi-faceted approach to meet young people's needs

In addition to consulting with young people, guidance should be sought from existing research as to successful methods to reduce youth violence. Some examples of successful approaches to reducing youth violence include:

- *Prevention and early intervention programs*:
  Violence prevention programs targeting children and those close to them (i.e. those who influence children in the early stages of their life) are among the most effective approaches to preventing violence. The evidence suggests that these early intervention programs are more successful at reducing violence than later programs seeking to reduce violence in adults[9].

- *Skill training and parenting programs to improve family relations and child-rearing techniques:*
  The objectives of these programs include improving the emotional bonds between parents and their children, encouraging parents to use consistent child-rearing methods and helping them to develop self-control in bringing up children. There is growing evidence that these interventions, especially those which start early and recognize all of the factors that can influence a family, can have substantial, long-term effects in reducing violent behaviour by children[10].

- *Social development programs to reduce antisocial and aggressive behaviour in children and violence among adolescents:*
  These commonly include improving competency and social skills with peers and generally promoting behaviour that is positive, friendly and cooperative. Such programs can be provided universally or to high-risk groups and are most frequently carried out in school or alternative education settings. Programs that emphasise social skills appear to be among the most effective among youth violence prevention strategies. They also appear to be more effective when delivered to children in preschool and primary school environments rather than to secondary school students[11]. This approach is supported by a report for the Injury Control Council of WA Inc. – *Community Violence among Young People* which found that when identifying possible strategies and interventions to reduce the harm associated with community violence, young people highlighted the necessity for early intervention strategies with families and young parents[12].

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[9] *Preventing violence and reducing its impact: How development agencies can help*, World Health Organization 2008
[10] *Best Practices of Youth Violence Prevention: A Sourcebook for Community Action,* Thornton, T.N., Craft, C.A., Dahlberg, L.L. Lynch, B.S., Baer, K., Atlanta, Georgia: Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, National Centre for Injury Prevention and Control, 2002 Revision
[11] *World report on violence and health*, Edited by Etienne G. Krug, Linda L. Dahlberg, James A. Mercy, Anthony B. Zwi and Rafael Lozano, World Health Organization, Geneva, 2002
[12] TNS Social Research prepared for Injury Control Council of WA Inc., *Community Violence among Young People*, 2007

A recent Australian Youth Forum (AYF) report on young people's views from **youTH**INK discussions on Violence and Safety[13], reflected considerable consistencies with the opinions of young people that the Commission engaged with about ways to reduce violence, such as the need for:

- school-wide programs to educate and inform them on maintaining their safety
- improvement in the relationships between the police and young people. Whilst one young person felt that the police interest in them was a positive and caring action, many young people feel pre-judged and threatened by police enquiring about their behaviour
- improved facilities in specific locations to enhance young people's feeling of safety, and
- better security on public transport and at train stations.

Responses from the YOS and Craigslea SHS focus groups revealed the following suggestions:

- *"More street lights in parks" (YOS, Female, 16)*

- *"Cameras could be installed* [at train stations] *and security guards might help" (YOS, Male, 16)*

- *"Police into the community more" (YOS, Male, 16)*

- *"CCTV would make people feel safer" (YOS, Female, 16)*

- *"But only if there were signs to let people know that cameras were in that area" (YOS, group comment)*

- *"Police at school – information and safety guidance" (Craigslea, Female, 16)*

- *"Young people need to know that if something happens at home they can get support in the school" (Craigslea, Female, 16)*

- *"Excluding young people from events or places will only increase, violence, graffiti, riots etc. (Craigslea, Male, 15)*

- *"Activities at night for young people"* and *"More skate parks and young people specific facilities" (Craigslea, Yr 8/9/10 group)*

- *"Train stations – security guards, lighting, emergency phones more visible. Graffiti would reduce. It would also reduce people's intent to go there and attack someone" (Craigslea, Females, 16 and 17)*

Whilst many of the young people's responses focused on environmental factors linked to safety in public places, there was also acknowledgement of the need to invest in educational programs to ensure that young people and families could be have a greater awareness of safety and the impact of violence.

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[13] *Violence and Safety – A report on* **youTH**INK *findings and website discussions*, Australian Youth Forum, Australian Government, p.3-5