

17, April 2010

Standing Committee on Family,  
Community, Housing and Youth  
House of Representatives  
Parliament of Australia

Dear Committee

***RE: Inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians***

Please see attached our comments regarding the above stated inquiry. We have specifically addressed and provide comments regarding the following terms of reference:

- perceptions of violence and community safety among young Australians
- social and economic factors that contribute to violence by young Australians
- strategies to reduce violence and its impact among young Australians

Many thanks for the opportunity to provide comments on an issue which continues to increase in importance.

Kind regards,

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## ***Introduction***

Firstly, we write to the Committee today as private citizens as well as Community Psychology students and provisional psychologists. What is more important, we submit this submission as we feel that this is an extremely important issue and as young women we have a vested interest in the issue of violence within our communities. That is, we all have had countless experiences of being in some way either directly or indirectly affected by this ever increasing violence between young people, and the media portrayal of young people as increasingly destructive and detached members of society. As young women, we find this increasingly disempowering, as we have had to adopt a heightened vigilance regarding our safety and wellbeing, due to this increase risk of violence, whether this risk is real or perceived.

Before briefly outlining our perspective and therefore our approach to this submission, we wish to commend the Committee on looking beyond the 'violent' individual and further into the community for both the causes and answers to this problematic social climate between young people.

## ***The ecological model***

Following a Community Psychology premises we consider the issue of violence within the community and its effects on young people from predominantly an ecological perspective. The ecological model or viewpoint is based on the understanding that individuals and the various social contexts and processes which they are involved with, such as organisations and communities interact and are ultimately interdependent (Kelly, Ryan, Altman & Stelzner, 2000). Overall, this ecological model provides an alternative way to address problems faced by people and instead of resorting to victim-blaming or individualised explanations, focuses on how such issues are embedded and characterised within the multiple layers of this eco-system from the individual to the macro-system (Orford; Nelson & Prilleltensky). This ecological model consists of three inter-reliant systems: the micro, meso and macro-systems (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). The following are definitions of these systems and their relevance to youth violence.

### ***Micro-system***

The micro-system refers to immediate environments which individuals interact with on a daily or regular basis, including family and social networks (Orford, 2008; Nelson & Prilleltensky). Therefore, in regards to youth violence, the influences of abuse, parenting-styles, exposure to interfamilial violence and peer interactions are considered to sit within this system.

### *Meso-system*

Meso-systems are the settings that mediate between smaller systems and the larger society. For example, it includes contexts such as organisational and school cultures which enable and tolerate aggressive attitudes and behaviours (e.g. bullying), thus sustaining violence.

### *Macro-system*

The macro-system is defined by wider reaching systems that influence the customary ideologies and social climate in which the micro and meso-systems operate. Therefore, this larger system includes social norms, gender roles and the political climate (Orford; Nelson & Prilleltensky). In relation to violence it is important to also consider notions of masculinity, the societal acceptance of excessive alcohol consumption and covert racism.

Furthermore, the fundamental notion of this ecological perspective is that due to these three levels being interconnected, what occurs in one system ultimately influences the other levels (Kelly et al; Nelson & Prilleltensky). Therefore, we maintain the notion that violence is unfortunately present within all levels of society, including the wider community, families and schools and violence within these social contexts ultimately influence one another and to an extent makes violence at times a tolerable behaviour. Furthermore, the issue of violence cannot be considered without investigating the impact of other factors such as gender stereotypes and norms, the current drinking culture and the media's portrayal of violence, which all perpetuate through society.

Finally, we understand violence to be defined as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation” (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002, p.5). However, for the purposes of this submission we are addressing the terms of reference with only the threat of or actual physical violence among youth in mind.

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

There is little consensus regarding the term community safety. The term encompasses many factors and represents an international shift from the narrow focus of crime prevention (Shaw, 2001). Community safety is conceptualised as an important aspect of the broader issue of health and wellbeing. According to Whitzan and Zhang (2006), community safety can be understood as the freedom of and fear from crime and violence. Despite the varying definitions, community safety is undoubtedly influential upon a person's quality of life. A person's experiences and perceptions of community safety shape their everyday decision making, including how and when they socialise or travel. While community safety is experienced at the individual level, its effects also permeate the community and societal levels.

### *Perceptions and reality of violence*

Community safety is related to perceptions of safety, vulnerability and levels of trust within neighbourhoods and communities. Despite their vulnerability to violence, young people are most likely to report feeling safe, while older people report the highest level of fear, irrespective of their lower rates of victimisation, in comparison to individuals aged between 15-24 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Therefore, perceptions of safety are not always reflective of actual risk. Statistics therefore reveal that young people pose the highest risk of experiencing violence. The following statistics provide an indication of the prevalence of violence among young people, in particular males. For example, approximately 21% of young men between the ages of 18-24 experience actual or threatened violence. Similarly, young males aged between 15-19 years report the highest rate of assault (9.9%) followed by 7.9% of 20-24 year olds. Notably, the majority of violence experienced by males (18-24 years) was at the hands of a stranger in a licensed premise (44%) or in a public space (34%). As indicated, young people are at greater risk of experiencing violence; however, their status as victims is undermined and underrepresented (Measor & Squires, 2000). Commonly, young people do not fit the traditional script of victim, therefore are less likely to be granted the status of victim.

Furthermore, the media plays a significant role in further undermining the victimisation of young people. Media reports of young people perpetrating crimes of violence are dominant, which reinforce general feelings of fear and mistrust (Polk, 1995). For instance, the sight of young people gathering in public spaces is often treated with suspicion and their very presence may be conceived as threatening (White & Manson, 2006). That is, this anxiety concerning young people in public spaces generates moral panic (Secrombe, 2003). In addition, young people in public spaces who congregate in groups are often misconceived as engaging in gang related behaviour. Moreover, such reports of gangs in the media are attributed to particular ethnicities, which in turn generate negative stereotypes. Thus, reports of ethnic or racial gangs are increasingly common and “reinvigorate racism and prejudice as a consequence” (Collins, 2005, p.3). These misconceptions only serve to further isolate and marginalise young people from their communities. These negative stereotypes of youth and violence are destructive to community safety and cohesion.

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

As stated, an ecological approach to youth violence considers the contexts in which an individual is embedded. Regarding the wellbeing of youth, it is important to consider the nature and degree of support encountered within the context of family, peers, school and the wider community (Barnes, et al., 2006; Bowes & Hayes, 2004).

In general, research has identified important dimensions of community characteristics to help understand youth risk factors for engaging in violence. For example, poverty and racial segregation have been identified as community structural characteristics, regarding risk of youth violence (Sabol et al., 2004; Bursik & Grasmick, 1993, cited in Sheidow et al., 2001). More specifically, social processes and organisation within the local neighbourhood have also been deemed important (Sampson et al., 1997; Sheidow et al., 2001). Social organisation includes perceived social support and cohesion among neighbours, sense of community, parenting styles, extra-familial guidance, situational stresses in the family (Barnett et al., 2005), support and participation (Sheidow et al., 2001). Therefore, both structural characteristics and neighbourhood social organisation (and their relationship) are important in understanding youth risk of violence (Sampson et al., 1997; Sheidow et al., 2001). Furthermore, low socioeconomic status, low neighbourhood attachment, laws and norms favourable toward violence, substance and illicit drug use, and exposure to community violence have been identified as other factors associated with this risk (Barnett et al., 2005). However, it is important to highlight that research has challenged the widely held belief that people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to engage in increased violence (Eckersley & Reeder, 2008).

In addition, social exclusion and lack of social capital have also been found to be linked with this risk of violence among youths (Barnett et al., 2005). As outlined by Burns et al (2008), there are specific factors which are considered to be associated with societal engagement. For example, poverty, exposure to violence, social isolation and lack of positive relationships are associated with gang membership, alcohol and drug use, mental illness and suicide (Burns et al.). While social networks and structures that promote diversity and provide support are associated with increased opportunities for engagement, sense of belonging and social inclusion (Burns et al.). Finally, it is important to note that even after Burns et al. controlled for many of these identified risk factors (i.e. socioeconomic status etc.), a significant variation remained in violent behaviour among young people between communities. This may indicate that other influences are not being accounted for in communities. Therefore, it is contended that such neglected factors may include the possible cultural influences on youth violence.

#### *Cultural influences on youth violence*

As stated, cultural influences on youth violence are often overlooked, for example, the perceived approval of cultural violence within society (Eckersley & Reeder, 2008). Another important influence is the presence of power differentials within society and the family with respect to gender, race, age and ability (Barnett et al., 2005).

In addition, technological developments and the media have been identified as contributors to the perceptions and beliefs of violence as a social norm (Eckersley & Reeder, 2008). An example of this is the media's racialisation and ethnic vilification (Carrington, 2009). It has been argued, that such public discourse provides a "permission to hate" by facilitating discrimination and failing to take action (Poynting, 2006, p. 88).

In sum, considering such influences which occurs at the broader level, highlights that youth violence is preventable, particularly when promoting supportive communities. Communities who value diversity are likely to facilitate positive engagement, participation, sense of belonging and social inclusion.

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

Overall, youth violence is a complex phenomenon and thus, there is no single solution. In taking an ecological approach to youth violence, strategies to prevent young people experiencing or perpetuating violence must work to reduce the wide range of risk factors and encourage the protective factors. More importantly, a multi-pronged approach to the prevention of youth violence is necessary (Dahlberg & Krug, 2002). This means, strategies should be comprehensive and implemented at multiple levels, including the individual, relational (family and peers or other social network), community (schools, neighbourhood, workplace or other organisations), and societal levels (e.g., social and cultural norms; broader socio-economic determinants). Therefore, without discounting the importance of the individual and relational prevention efforts, it is felt that community and societal level prevention strategies should be of particular focus.

#### *The individual level*

In general, the importance of the early years as the critical period to implement early interventions, such as teaching life skills or socially appropriate behaviours in preschool, has been emphasised (Tremblay, Gervais, & Petitclerc, 2008). However, it is strongly argued that strategies to reduce youth violence should be continuous in nature. That is, they should be implemented across developmental stages and tailored according to the risk and protective factors relevant to the stage (i.e., developmentally appropriate).

#### *The relational level*

Furthermore, within Australia strategies such as home visitation or parenting training have been well established. For instance, the World Report on Violence and Health (Krug et al., 2002) has recognised the benefits of Maternal and Child Health Services and comprehensive parenting

training programs such as the Triple-P-Positive. Existing strategies at this level should be further enhanced and made available and accessible to all families, particularly the most vulnerable.

### *The community level*

Generally, school-based programs feature heavily in the strategies to reduce youth violence. These programs vary from increasing surveillance (e.g., metal detectors, security guards), deterrence (e.g., rules, regulations, zero tolerance policies), to psychosocial interventions. Some of these programs have been successful and shown positive effects (e.g., Wilson & Lipsey, 2005; Wilson, Lipsey, and Derzon, 2003). Promising results have also been found from universal school-wide violence prevention programs (e.g., Simon et al., 2008; Vazsonyi, Belliston, & Flannery, 2004). Despite their achievements, school-based programs alone are inadequate, that is schools are only one way to reach these young people. Therefore, along with school-based and family-based prevention efforts, community-based prevention programs need to be supported. School-community partnerships have become a feasible way. For instance, community-based coalitions who collaborate with schools have been promoted as a promising mechanism to reduce youth involvement in violence, offending and substance use (Fagan, Weiss, Cady, & Hawkins, 2009). Consequently, community-based strategies to reduce youth violence should involve the following four factors:

#### 1. Youth Engagement

A growing literature on youth civic engagement has advocated that youth engagement is likely to reduce interpersonal violence and offending, while concurrently promote community cohesion or membership and the development of positive youth competencies and emotional well being (Zeldin, 2004). Adolescents' participation in voluntary or required services has been found to be associated with positive academic, behavioural and civic outcomes (Schmidt, Shumow, & Kackar, 2007). Further, youth who participate in both school-based and community-based programs remain more civically engaged throughout adulthood compared to their counterparts (Borden & Serido, 2009).

#### 2. Strengths-based perspective

A strengths perspective is integral in building interventions that are based on strengths and in turn reduces the focus on pathology (Saleebey, 2005). This provides youth with a sense of belonging, connectedness, being valued, and allows opportunities for meaningful engagement (Delgado, 2002). Cheon (2008) stated that youth are "powerful contributors to solving some of the country's most intractable problems" (p.1). Therefore, views of young people should be included in community decision making, especially when considering youth issues. For example, youth should be encouraged to participate in the development, implementation, and evaluation of programs and services. In addition, incentives or recognitions should be offered to motivate young people to participate in such activities.

### 3. Evidence-based approaches

Overall, common sense approaches should be avoided when addressing complex social issues such as youth violence (Mazerolle, 2007). It is contended that community-based strategies should be rigorously evaluated and routinely assessed to ensure their effectiveness. Successful strategies, programs and services should be disseminated to the wider public, for instance via the Promising Practice Profile initiated by the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia would be a possibility.

### 4. Media

As stated previously, the media has a significant role in influencing youth and other community members' perception of violence and community safety. Rather, the media should be utilised as a channel to increase awareness regarding the issue and alter existing norms condoning the use of violence (e.g., social norms marketing). It is believed that the media has the capacity to alter such misconceptions regarding youth violence by portraying positive images of youth; rather than solely depicting youth as 'trouble makers', and moving away from equating youth crime with ethnicity and race.

#### *The societal level*

The following strategies should be emphasised at the societal level:

- Strengthening and improving existing legislation and polices (federal, state or local) that aim to improve social conditions and reduce social inequalities (e.g., providing better access to education, health and employment), and
- Establishing a funding mechanism to resource prevention efforts aiming to reduce youth violence and its impacts.

Most importantly, strategies should not be considered in isolation. Therefore, collaboration and partnership across sectors (governments, business, civil society, and religious sectors), and across fields or disciplines (e.g., criminal justice, psychology, public health, education) are essential. Keeping in line with a Community Psychology perspective, it is maintained that attention should be prioritised towards universal or primary prevention rather than intervention (band-aid approaches) to ensure cost-effectiveness and long-term positive outcomes.



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