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

ENQUIRY INTO THE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE ON YOUNG AUSTRALIANS

The 20th Man Fund is pleased to provide this submission in relation to the important issue of the Impact of Violence on Young Australians, and the related topic of Knife Usage by Young People. Firstly our organisation would like to congratulate the Australian Government on the initiation of this valuable investigation and we trust that we may be able to assist in your enquiries,

We use the catch cry 'get rid of you knife and change your life', which reinforces the notion of disarming young men and women to increase their safety. Youth violence is a reflection on notions of safety by young people, people living on the street in particular are likely to carry knives as they fear that they will be harmed as they feel vulnerable. Our organisation believes that youth homeless and unstable housing is a major contributor to youth violence.

We understand that through the inquiry process the Committee will specifically examine the following:

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

Youth Violence – The Statistics

Youth violence is a significant ongoing problem requiring a variety of informed approaches to address long term developmental risks and short term, dynamic risks leading to violent incidents. We must not embrace "common sense" approaches to complex social problems like youth violence. Programs need to be targeted, evidence based and routinely assessed to ensure they are relevant and effective. Effective responses and further understanding is data and knowledge dependant, and the Federal and

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Youth violence most often involves:

- Young Males
- Participation rates vary from 4:1 to 7:1
- Different levels of involvement but similar processes leading to violence are often observed for males and females
- Frequently involves illegal use of knives
- Homelessness and unstable housing is a contributor to youth violence, as young people live on the street.

Key Influences of Youth Violence

The key influence of youth violence is as follows:

- Being a young person aged 15-24 years of age
- Being of the male gender
- Alcohol is a significant influencing factor
- Family and cultural background are influencers
- Peer influences play a significant role
- Anger and attitudes to violence play a huge role
- Weapon availability

Suggested Recommendations to Address Youth Violence

1. TAC style Community Service Announcements for Television, Youth Radio and internet using high profile people getting the message across such as "If your tooled you are a TOOL" etc
2. Employing very experienced Youth Workers to be deployed in known Stabbing "hot spots" as well as Schools to educate and promote a feeling of confidence.
3. Knife Exchange to help promote community awareness and promote number 4.
4. Amnesty for collection of weapons then melting them down for Art Work.
5. Promote more Alcohol Free events as being "HIP" and the place to be.
6. Schools to be more aggressive in promoting Sport and Recreation especially after school.
7. Encourage young women to frown upon males who carry weapons as "Drop Kicks"

Their just a few suggestions having been a Youth Worker and School Teacher for almost 4 decades as well as looking at Weapons, Gangs and youth violence here and overseas for the past 30 plus years.

20th Man Fund

The 20th Man Fund is a dedicated group of professionals and volunteers from various "walks of life", who have come together to make a difference in the lives of the homeless and disadvantaged.

The 20th Man Fund's work is based on the belief that:

"Every child, young person & family has a right to a future free of poverty, discrimination and abuse"

Proactive programs around sport, recreation and drama to prevent kids from falling into the clutches of crime, prostitution and drugs is the primary focus of the Fund.

The 20th Man Fund is committed to delivering real support to the people who need it most - the kids in distress and the community contact workers trying to help them. Every day, many at-risk youths are helped through the 20th Man Fund's programs and support.

We have attached a number of articles concerning Youth and Knife Usage which we believe may be of value to your deliberations. Refer Attachments 1 – Attachment 4 which were written by Mr Bob Falconer.

The 20th Man's founder Mr Les Twentyman OAM would be pleased to attend one of the foreshadowed public hearings to present further information on the issue of Youth Violence, and in particular the associated matter of illegal knife usage.

I look forward to your advice as to when the public hearings will take place in relation to this Enquiry. I can be contacted on 0408 569 155.

Yours faithfully

Les Twentyman OAM

Let's get real on knives problem

Last Sunday a knife exchange experiment took place in Melbourne's inner west. Its catch cry was "Exchange your knife. Change your life" The good news is that over fifty weapons were handed in but more importantly a number of young knife carriers came into contact with youth workers who want to help them change their lives for the better. The idea for the trial came from youth workers at Open Family and the Footscray Police who know all about the frequency of knives being carried in public places and the disasters that flow from such a culture.

Here is the bad news. Teachers in the area would not allow posters for the event to be placed in their schools; not because the carrying of knives by pupils is not a problem, but for fear of the reactions of the bureaucracy and the parents. A few weeks ago I had the opportunity to ask a group of education security personnel from all around Australia how big a problem kids carrying knives at school was. The response was that it was large and growing but it was not being officially conceded.

What about out in the streets? Security checks at Parliament house identify school kids carrying knives. The metal detector at the Melbourne Magistrate's Court regularly locates knives being carried by those entering the precincts. In one five day period in March eight people were stabbed in six incidents that occurred in public streets or train stations. Those events were described as a "statistical blip". Given the seeming shortage of knife statistics maybe that was technically true albeit not well received by many. Note that none of those six assaults occurred in homes. We all know that access to and use of knives during violent incidents in residences is another issue altogether. But surely the carriage of knives in public places as either a perceived necessity for self protection or as a part of some "macho" weapons carrying culture has to be tackled.

By coincidence on the same day we were launching our local campaign results of a five week knife amnesty were reported from the UK. Over 100,000 knives were handed in. While it is good to remove potentially deadly weapons from the public we must concede that the supply of cutting weapons is potentially endless and therefore amnesties have limited value. Terrorists during the 9/11 events used what the Americans call "box cutters" which are readily available throughout our community. Carving knives are in virtually every home. So what is to be done?

The UK Home Office solution is to "crack down on those carrying knives and spend on education programmes to make young people aware of the dangers". In other words do what Les Twentyman and I first raised here in 1992. So what has been done in the past 14 years?

There have been two potentially effective, but far too short attempts to send the message that it is undesirable, illegal and unacceptable to carry knives in our community. One campaign was in 1994, the other in 2002. On both occasions they were far too brief. If we are to change attitudes and impact on behaviour then such a campaign needs commitment and cash. Look at drink driving and speeding as successful examples.

Attachment 1
Herald Sun Article – Bob Falconer 2006

On the enforcement front there has also been some action but there are still problems. In spite of changes to the Control of Weapons Act it is too cumbersome and restrictive in respect to the right of police to effectively search people in public places. That is primarily why the several hundred metal detectors are largely underutilised. In spite of the hopes of some older members of the public the days of search by bluff and bluster are gone forever. Operational police need to be legitimately authorised by law to do their job on the streets. If they do not have the necessary “reasonable grounds” they cannot conduct a search. To do so can bring about a complaint and criticism. And if they seize a weapon without adequate grounds to support a prosecution then the owner/carrier can apply for its return.

I concede that this article is based on anecdotal evidence and in this day of research-based decision making the opinions and beliefs of those working at the coal face are seemingly taken less seriously than statistics from a computer. However I challenge police and education department leaders to conduct some research that includes focus groups from among their people from the streets and in the schools. If their staff report what they are telling Les Twentyman and me then at least the fact there are too many knives out there will be officially on the table. And we all know that admitting there is a problem is the first step.

By Bob Falconer

Former Police Deputy Commissioner (Victoria) and Chief Commissioner (WA)

Article for The Sunday Age – July 8 2007

Another disaster. A group of young people with knives and machetes fighting a pitched battle in our suburbs. Why is this happening, how big is the problem and what can be done about it? The why is far too complex to cover in any short article, the size of the problem is difficult to judge, largely due to the inaccuracy and in some cases absence, of independently retained and reliable data. But anyone who listens to or reads the news must know that the carriage of knives in public places is more common than ever before. So what is being done about it?

Since the early 90's successive governments have amended the relevant legislation and increased the penalties for the carriage and unlawful use of weapons. The Brack's government ramped them up again recently and also provided police with hundreds of hand-held metal detectors although operational police report they are little used.

Enforcement supported by appropriate penalties is important but surely our government and its senior officials have learnt by now that the way to change unacceptable and harmful behaviour is through education and enforcement. Victoria was the first in the world to do it with seatbelts. We have used the formula to tackle drink driving, speeding and now smoking. So what has been done in regard to the weapons carrying problem? The answer is precious little.

Along with youth worker, Les Twentyman I first started publicly highlighting the increase of knife carrying and use in 1992. I was pleased when in 1995 the then Kennett government ran a short but effective media campaign about the unacceptable nature of weapons carriage. Sadly it ran only for a short time but anecdotal evidence was that it had some downwards impact on the problem.

In October 2001 Les and I again came together when we were invited to be members of a Ministerial Crime Prevention Council (MCPC). At that very first meeting when the Chairman went around the table asking for suggestions on key issues to address. Independently, we each raised the same two topics; gangs and weapons.

The MCPC recommended changes to enhance enforcement and education which were supported by Minister Haermeyer. Research was conducted including using focus groups of police and young people. The consultant identified the messages and significant others that young people listen to but once again these messages were only utilised for a very short time essentially because of a limited budget. Again there was no empirical data available but youth workers like Les and front line police believed it had some positive impact.

Since then there have been two new Police Ministers, a twelve month hiatus in the operations of the MCPC and more recently an amalgamation with another advisory council to become the Victorian Community Council on Crime and Violence (VCCCAV).

Once again our weapons working group raised the issue of an ongoing and appropriate media campaign to try and convince our young people that carrying weapons, particularly knives, is not the right way to live so we are now waiting for fresh consultants and the conduct of contemporary focus groups in spite of the fact that youth workers and street police say the only thing that has changed since the last local research in 2002 is that things have gotten worse. Surely we do not have to wait until we accumulate enough knife casualties before this community safety issue gets the priority it deserves?

Bob Falconer is former Deputy Commissioner of Victoria Police, Commissioner of Police for WA and Chairman of STOpline who provide hotlines for internal whistleblowers.

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Item for Herald Sun – Was the VCCCAV a victim of PC?

A significant event took place in Footscray on Sunday morning. It was to celebrate what can happen when communities, local businesses, corporate sponsors and sporting role models get together to tackle a serious societal problem; in this case the carrying of knives. A unique sculpture sponsored by Sims Metals and created by Brisbane artist Chris Trotter from knives which had previously been carried as weapons was unveiled and local Police leaders expressed their appreciation to the citizens who had dedicated their time and energy to the project that culminated in the current event. Disappointingly there was no state government representatives involved but then they were also absent when the original knife hand-back campaign took place.

Over two years ago Officer in Charge of Footscray Police, Senior Sergeant Bill Weatherly and youth worker Les Twentyman decided to do something constructive about the problem of young people going about in public armed with cutting edge weapons. They came up with the concept of a campaign to encourage young people who were already carrying knives to hand them in and change their lives for the better. In addition to police and Open Family they obtained the support and involvement of a number of local businesses, the Footscray Football Club and basket-ball players from the Melbourne Tigers.

On the day of the hand back in May 2006 over fifty weapons were handed in. Youth workers made meaningful contact with some young people at risk and a couple of those became advocates in discouraging their peers from arming themselves. At a broader level it was intended to use the campaign to draw the attention of this growing and dangerous trend to other influential segments of the broader community, particularly parents and school officials which would require funding for a concerted media and poster campaign.

Les Twentyman subsequently tabled the results of the hand back at the then Victorian Community Council on Crime and Violence (VCCCAV) to demonstrate both the extent of the problem and also show that with some direction and dynamism it was possible to obtain community involvement and make a difference. Along with Les, other members of that council, including myself, had been raising concerns about the increase in the carriage of weapons and youth gangs for some years. The government certainly increased penalties for weapons offences and the police were enforcing the law. But in addition to those actions members of the council were advocating the need for a professional, ongoing and concerted public media campaign to discourage the carrying of knives. The benefits of concurrent education and enforcement campaigns have previously been well demonstrated in regard to the wearing of seat belts, drink driving and speeding.

With the input of the community council some very good anti weapon advertisements and posters were utilised in 2004 but for too short a time due to a slim budget allocation. The need for a more sustained campaign was being raised vigorously at the VCCCAV right up to the time it was unceremonially closed down in late 2007.

The VCCCAV members, some of whom had given their unpaid service for many years, subsequently received a letter from Police Minister Cameron advising us the community liaison role would be taken over by Victoria Police and that the Chief Commissioner had

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recommended “that I not reappoint the Council”. He then offered some comments of thanks and that was it; unlike last Sunday there was no morning tea or hand shakes.

My personal view is that we had become nuisances by continually highlighting two politically sensitive issues of serious concern; knives and youth gangs. Media coverage of those problems invariably drew comments about ethnicity and council membership also gave us access to statistics and other information that added credence to our public statements. For those reasons I suspect that the committee was a victim of political correctness.

As far as former VCCCAV members are aware nothing further has been done in regard to the anti-weapons advertisement campaign. But of course we are aware of frequent media reports of crimes involving knives and that hospital trauma surgeons have spoken out about the growth of the problem. Meanwhile the Government is constantly assuring us crime is down 25 per cent while seemingly downgrading its capacity and commitment to encouraging and recognising citizens who are doing something constructive about improving community safety and security. Go figure.

Bob Falconer is a former Deputy Commissioner of Victoria Police, former police Chief Commissioner for Western Australia and Chairman of STOPline, a provider of whistleblower hotline services.

State Government’s failure to adopt an anti-knives education campaign

October 2001

Police Minister Haermeyer announces the establishment of a Ministerial Crime Prevention Council (MCPC) which reported to the Police Minister with secretarial support from the Department of Justice (DOJ).

At first meeting the author and youth worker Les Twentyman independently raised “their” two key issues as; knives and gangs.

At subsequent meetings the MCPC adopted these two topics as matter for attention by the group.

Next steps

Through the MCPC the issue of the incidence of weapons carriage (particularly knives) was raised with the Minister. The proven dual approach of tackling the problem by means of education and enforcement was promoted and to some extent adopted.

The Victoria Police provided advice on the need for legislative change and the logistical and practical constraints associated with enforcement. The Government did amend elements of the relevant act and also increased penalties for weapons carriage.

Public media campaign 2002

The MCPC concentrated on obtaining ministerial support for a public education campaign. Funding and approval was acquired from Government and funding provided for a short campaign which was conducted in 2002.

Posters were prepared and disseminated to pubs and clubs and radio ads were run. (Due to a very lean budget television time was limited to community support slots)

Interestingly the wording of the posters utilised the terms ‘dick-head’ and ‘wanker’, which had been identified by the youth focus-groups. Initially the campaign was supported by Mr Haermeyer, stalled before a Cabinet sub-group (essentially because of those words) and only gained final approval as a direct involvement by the then Premier Mr Bracks.

MCPC amalgamation with the VCCAV in 2005

In 2005 the Government amalgamated the MCPC with the Victorian Community Council Against Violence (which had been functioning since 1998).

The new entity was named the Victorian Community Council on Crime and Violence (VCCCAV)

Attachment 4
Fact Sheet on Anti Knife Education – Bob Falconer

Previous members of the MCPC, particularly, the author and Les Twentyman continued to express their concerns about the carriage and use of knives in public places and raised them both in meetings and publicly.

Knife ‘Exchange’ Pilot

In July 2006 Les Twenty-man organised a pilot “knife exchange” at the Sunshine and Footscray railway car parks. (In effect it was an unofficial amnesty)

It was not supported by the government or the VCCCAV however the Victoria Police took an active and very helpful part in the exercise along with professional sports people, corporate sponsors and local youth workers.

Posters to promote the exchange were circulated to schools and amateur sports clubs. Les Twentyman was later advised by teachers that their schools dare not display the posters for fear of ‘head office’.

The event recovered some knives, brought youth workers into contact with weapon carrying youth and received wide-spread publicity about the problem and possible social solutions.

Activities in 2007

The VCCCAV Weapons Working Group again raised the need for an education campaign to attempt to deter young people (in particular) from carrying knives.

Funding was sought and obtained for a ‘communications evaluation’ which included once again conducting focus groups to identify the attitudes and reactions of young people.

On 21 August 2007 the author and other members of the VCCCAV ‘Working group on weapons’ received advice from the Department of Justice that a presentation would be made to the working group in September.

On 23 August the Government announced tougher penalties for persons caught carrying knives and other dangerous articles within 20M of a licensed venue.

On 28 August the VCCCAV met and status reports were provided on various agenda items including the weapons working group issues.

As usual advice on the next scheduled meeting was provided – Tuesday 16 October

Demise of the VCCCAV – October 2007

A few days before that scheduled meeting the author and other members of the VCCCAV received a letter from the General Manager of the Crime & Violence Prevention unit of the DOJ cancelling the 16 October meeting of the Council.

Attachment 4
Fact Sheet on Anti Knife Education – Bob Falconer

It further advised that as of 15 October 2007 the Crime & Violence Prevention Unit would be restructured with staff now to become part of Justice Policy or Victoria Police.

The penultimate paragraph advised that Council members would be contacted and provided with further advice “in the next few weeks” and in the interim the Department would be progress the Council’s current work program.

Six month’s silence and then the Minister’s Letter

After the cancellation of the October meeting members of the VCCCAV, including the author, attempted to find the status of outstanding matters, including the proposed anti-knives campaign to no avail.

On 18 April 2008 the Minister, Mr Cameron wrote to all members advising them that the responsibility for community consultation had been moved to Victoria Police and the Chief Commissioner was conducting a review on that very topic. In the interim she had recommended that he not reappoint the Council.

He then thanked the members for their efforts with the council and that was that.

Authors letter to the Minister

On 3 December 2008 the author wrote to Mr Cameron in primarily enquiring as to what had happened to the fresh weapons media campaign we were working on when the Council was closed down.

On 26 February 2009 I received a lengthy reply from the Minister which told me a lot about things that the Victoria Police were supposed to be doing but did not answer that key question on the status of the proposed campaign. He also advised that he did send a copy of my letter to the Chief Commissioner of Police.

Since then

The problem is clearly worse; the need is more crucial and it seems the notion of an anti-weapons public media campaign has been lost or scrapped?

A combination of education and enforcement has produced positive results with other attitudinal/behavioural issues such as; wearing seat belts, speeding, drink driving and smoking

The State Government spends a fortune on advertising; including material that simply tells us they are doing their job. Why are they not allocating some of it to this worthwhile campaign? Perhaps it is because they have been chanting that crime in Victoria is “down 24 percent since 2001” and now they are not game to concede that violent crime, particularly offences against the person where knives are used, are up considerably? My message is get over it and do something!

Bob Falconer 31 May 2009