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(Youth Violence)

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

Inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians

On behalf of the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) I am pleased to make the attached submission to the inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians.

The AIC is Australia's national research and knowledge centre on crime and criminal justice. Violent crime and justice issues involving young people are major areas of research for the AIC and we welcome the opportunity to contribute to Committee's knowledge on these topics.

The AIC's submission relates to each of the inquiry's terms of reference and also contains background information on the prevalence of violence involving young people in Australia.

I would also like to confirm my acceptance of the Committee's invitation for the AIC to appear before it on Wednesday 10 February 2010.

Yours sincerely

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Director

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Australian Government

Australian Institute of Criminology

Submission to the Inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians

Australian Institute of Criminology

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The Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) is pleased to have the opportunity to make the following submission for the information of the Committee.

This submission will provide some background information on violent offending involving young Australians and will provide information in respect of each of the Inquiry's terms of reference:

- 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 on 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.



Submission to the Inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians

Australian Institute of Criminology

1. Background

The Australian Institute of Criminology

The Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) is Australia's national research and knowledge centre on crime and justice. It seeks to promote justice and reduce crime by undertaking and communicating evidence-based research to inform policy and practice. The Institute is a Commonwealth statutory authority established in 1973, operating under the *Criminology Research Act 1971*.

The AIC has a strong record of conducting research on crime issues involving young people. Past AIC projects have included:

- Sport, physical activity and antisocial behaviour among youth – a survey of over 600 sporting programs to identify elements for preventing youth antisocial behaviour (Morris, Sallybanks & Willis 2003)
- Drug use careers of offenders (DUCO) – drug and alcohol use of juvenile detainees (Prichard & Payne 2005)
- Recidivism among juvenile offenders– an analysis of times to reappearance in court (Carcach & Leverett 1999).

More recent AIC research has included:

- Juveniles' contact with the criminal justice system in Australia (Richards 2009a)
- Adolescence, pornography and harm (Bryant 2009)
- A review of initiatives for child complainants in the court system (Richards 2009b).

A number of the AIC's monitoring programs also collect data on juveniles. These include:

- The National Homicide Monitoring Program
- Juveniles in Detention in Australia.



Police contact with juveniles in Australia

Police data provide an insight into the proportion of crime for which juveniles are the alleged offenders. This proportion varies substantially by jurisdiction (see Richards 2009a) because of state/territory differences in legislation, police practice and data collection methods. It is therefore not possible to create an accurate national picture of juvenile offending, yet police jurisdictional data do provide the best available estimate of prevalence and the nature of juvenile offending (see Richards 2009a). For example:

- In **NSW**, juveniles comprised **26%** of all persons of interest during 2006–07
- In the **ACT**, juveniles comprised **9%** of all persons taken into police custody during the same period
- Juveniles comprised **22%** of all offenders processed by **Victoria** Police during 2007-08
- **Queensland** police apprehended juveniles in relation to **19%** of all offences during the 2006–07 financial year
- In **South Australia**, juveniles comprised **17%** of all accused persons during 2006-07
- Juveniles in **Western Australia** comprised **8%** of distinct persons arrested during 2005.

A number of general observations can be made about juveniles' contact with the police in Australia:

- More juvenile **males** than juvenile females come into contact with the police
- A disproportionately high number of **Indigenous** juveniles come into contact with the police
- More **older juveniles** (15 to 17 year olds) than younger juveniles (10 to 14 year olds) come into contact with the police
- Juveniles typically come into contact with the police in relation to **property** crimes rather than crimes against the person. An AIC study of drug use and offending among juveniles in detention found that the most common types of regular offending were buying drugs (76%), burglary (65%), stealing without break-in (56%) and trading in stolen goods (55%). Regular violent behaviour was less common, with 29 percent of respondents indicating regular assaultive behaviours (Prichard & Payne 2005)
- The proportion of police apprehensions of juveniles that occur in relation to *offences against the person* varies among jurisdictions, and ranges from 9% in Queensland to 21% in the Northern Territory (Richards 2009a)



- Female juveniles comprise varied proportions of all juveniles apprehended by police in relation to offences against the person. This ranges from 18% in Victoria to 32% in the Northern Territory
- Rates of female delinquency are increasing, and are increasing at a rate faster than that for boys (Carrington 2006)
- Police deal with most juveniles via **diversionary** measures (such as warnings, cautions and conferences) rather than traditional legal measures (proceeding to court).

Characteristics of violence perpetrated by young people

In general, recorded offending by juveniles has been **declining** steadily in recent years. Rates of offending by 10 to 14 year olds have been declining since 1995–96 and rates of offending by 15 to 19 year olds have been declining since approximately 1999–2000 (AIC 2009). Offending rates are nonetheless consistently highest among 15 to 19 year olds, followed by 20 to 24 year olds and 10 to 14 year olds (AIC 2009).

Although data on violent offending by young people are not available for every jurisdiction, data for **NSW** show that the rate of juvenile offenders proceeded against by the police for **violent offences has increased by more than 44% since 2001**. During the same period, the rate of juvenile offenders proceeded against for property crimes decreased by 24% (New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research – NSW BOCSAR - 2009a).

During the five years between January 2004 and December 2008, NSW police proceedings against juveniles increased most significantly in relation to **robbery without a weapon** (18%), **domestic violence-related assault** (12%) and malicious damage to property (9%) (NSW BOCSAR 2009a).

New South Wales (NSW BOCSAR 2009b) data show that the incidence of ‘glassings’ increased significantly during the period from January 2004 to December 2008. Although these data are not disaggregated by the age of the offender, it is likely that many perpetrators are young people.

Males and females aged 15 to 24 years experience assault at higher rates than any other age group in the Australian community (AIC 2009). The number of assaults that occur annually has increased on average by five percent each year from 1995 to 2007. This represents a four-fold increase over the increase in the Australian population across the same period (AIC 2009).



Characteristics of young violent offenders

In contrast to adult offenders, young offenders tend to:

- commit offences in groups
- commit offences that are attention-seeking and gregarious
- commit episodic, unplanned and opportunistic offences
- commit offences in public areas, such as on public transport and in shopping centres
- commit offences close to where they live (Cunneen & White 2007).

These characteristics of juvenile offending impact upon relations between police and young people.

It should be noted that only a minority of young people are ever apprehended by the police. Seventeen percent of all individuals born in South Australia in 1984 were apprehended by the police on at least one occasion (Cappo 2007). The vast majority of these (86%) were apprehended only once (Cappo 2007). Australian and international research consistently demonstrates that a small 'core' of young offenders are responsible for vastly disproportionate levels of crime (Cappo 2007).

AIC research on child homicide (Dearden, Richards & Tomison, under review) found that most 15 to 17 year old victims of homicide were killed in areas outside the home, such as in an open area or on a street/road. AIC homicide data also show that for this age bracket, nearly three-quarters of homicides occur between 6.00pm and 6.00am, and nearly two-thirds occur on a Friday, Saturday or Sunday. These figures suggest that young people's social behaviours have an impact on the occurrence of homicide.

ToR1: Perceptions of violence and community safety among young Australians

A large national survey, of over 45,000 young Australians aged 11 to 24 years, found that bullying and emotional abuse was an issue of concern for 23.4 percent of respondents, ranking only behind drugs (26.8%), suicide (26.3%), body image (25.5%) and family conflict (24.1%) (Mission Australia 2009). Some 22.7 percent of young Australians reported that physical or sexual abuse was an issue of concern for them, with 22.2 percent citing personal safety as a concern. Physical/sexual abuse was much more of a concern to female (27.5%) than male (17.0% respondents). These issues were more of a concern to young people than stress, depression, school or study problems, the environment, self harm, discrimination or sexuality.



In a national survey investigating crime victimisation and perceptions of crime among 7,000 respondents aged 16 years and over, 29 percent of young people (aged 16 to 24 years) report feeling 'a bit unsafe' or 'very unsafe' walking alone in their local area after dark (Johnson 2005). This was higher than for the age groups 25 to 34 years (23%) and 35 to 59 (25%) (Johnson 2005).

ToR2: The relationship between bullying and violence on the wellbeing of young Australians

Research shows that exposure to violence, whether as a victim or witness, can result in a range of emotional and social problems, including anxiety, low self-esteem, depression and low academic achievement (Haddow 2006, Reid & Sullivan 2009). The impacts will typically be greater when violence as experienced on a regular basis over time, such as may occur through bullying. The psychological impacts of violence may also be heightened when a child is victimised by their primary caregiver, as the perpetrator becomes both the source of the threat as well as being the basis of the child's sense of safety and social attachment (Putnam 2006; Reid & Sullivan 2009).

There is substantial evidence to show that children who experience violence, as victim or witness, are at an increased risk of becoming violent themselves, compared with children who have not experienced violence (Katzmann 2002: 8; Dodge, Bales & Pettit 1990). It is not only being abused or subjected to direct violence that can harm children and young people. Exposure to violence as a witness can produce similar detrimental outcomes for a child as actually being abused or neglected and there is also evidence that a child who observes siblings and parents being maltreated by someone close to the child can lead more directly to the intergenerational transmission of violence than the child experiencing maltreatment themselves (Tomison 2000).

Through a process of intergenerational transmission, a proportion of children who experience or witness verbal and physical violence, particularly where the violence involves parents, are in danger of developing aggressive behaviour towards other children and also becoming violent offenders themselves (Lamers-Winkelmann 2008: 63; Tomison 2000; Widom 1992). It appears that it is the emotional suffering underlying maltreatment that is passed down parents to children, rather than necessarily the maltreatment itself, suggesting that emotional abuse and neglect may also result in the intergenerational transmission of negative behaviours, including violence (Tomison 2000).

Social learning theory suggests that when children and young people are exposed to violence it may become a learned behaviour, with children learning to model or adopt the violent behaviours they see demonstrated by significant others in their lives, particularly parents and caregivers. There is some debate around whether the impacts of violence are most acutely experienced and produce the most detrimental outcomes when children are exposed to violence at a young age or later, during adolescence, with competing theoretical



perspectives. While the 'developmental model' (Cicchetti & Cohen 1995; Cicchetti & Rogosch 1997) sees the impacts of maltreatment in early childhood having a resonating impact on psychological development throughout adolescence and into adulthood, the 'life-course perspective model' (Elder 1998; Elder & Caspi 1988) theorises that more proximal events occurring later in the life course may have more impact than distal experiences that occurring in early childhood. This suggests that exposure to violence or maltreatment in adolescence is more likely to have more behavioural impacts than if it was experienced in childhood. However, the theoretical models converge on the notion that abuse or maltreatment that begins in childhood and continues through adolescence has the greatest impact on later behaviour.

Research has demonstrated a strong connection between childhood abuse and higher rates of offending behaviour in later life (Smith & Thornberry 1995; Stewart, Dennison & Waterson 2002a, 2002b; Weatherburn & Lind 1997; Widom & Maxfield 2001; Zingraff et al 1003). Children exposed to maltreatment, including violence, may begin committing crimes at younger ages, commit nearly twice as many offences as children who have not been abused, and are arrested more frequently than non-abused children (Katzmann 2002: 8). Widom and Maxfield (2001) found that in comparison to a non-abused control cohort, abused children were 30 percent more likely to be arrested for a violent crime later in life. Witnessing and experiencing violence from a young age has been shown to be apparent later in life as being strongly linked with both a desensitisation towards violence and a predisposition towards people being violent in their own relationships (National Crime Prevention 1993: 3). In a study involving 480 offenders in Queensland, Teague and Mazerolle (2007) found that 'the frequency of violent offending was around three times higher for victims of extreme levels of physical abuse than for respondents with no reported history of abuse'.

Another Queensland study found that 27 percent of children with substantiated maltreatment went on to offend as juveniles, compared with 21 percent of children with only unsubstantiated notifications and 16 percent of children who had no contact with the child protection system (Stewart 2009). Of the young offenders in this study who appeared in court, 20 percent had been maltreated (Stewart 2009). Stewart argued that significant predictive factors of offending included the age of the final maltreatment, the number of maltreatment incidents and the experience of neglect and physical abuse. Children who experience maltreatment as adolescents are much more likely to have contact with the juvenile justice system. The study also highlighted a range of negative outcomes aside from offending, such as mental health issues, suicide, substance abuse, early pregnancy and relationship difficulties.

A study undertaken by the AIC for the Australian Federal Police examined the involvement of children in family violence incidents. Across a three year period from 2001-02 to 2003-04, children were recorded by police as being present in between 38 and 44 percent of the 3,933 incidents examined (Taylor 2006). A total of over 5,000 children were present at these family violence incidents. Where the age of the children was known, approximately half of



them were between 11 and 17 years. In approximately 10 percent of cases each year the child or young person was the offender in the family violence incident, while in approximately five to 12 percent, the child or young person was a participant. The child or young person was a victim of violence in approximately 15 to 18 percent of cases. In the remaining incidents, the child or young person was present while the violence was occurring (Taylor 2006). If this sample of family violence from one jurisdiction is an incident, there are a very large number of children each year exposed to violence in the home, as well as others exposed outside the home.

ToR3: Social and economic factors that contribute to violence by young Australians

A broad range of social and economic factors potentially contribute to the development of violent and other crime, including:

- social exclusion through economic and social disadvantage, including deficits in employment, education and housing
- alcohol and other drug use
- the breakdown of social structures and social controls
- negative social influences
- exposure to violence.

A study examining risk and protective factors for youth violence in Australia (Victoria) and the United States (Washington State) examined these factors across five domains – individual student, family, peers, school and community (Hemphill et al. 2009). The study collected data in two waves, 12 months apart, and involved approximately 4,000 students aged 12 to 16 years. Protective factors that reducing the likelihood of youths being violent were being female and student emotional control (Hemphill et al. 2009). The study found that the main risk factors predicting violence in both samples were:

- prior violent behaviour
- family conflict
- association with violent peers
- community disorganisation
- community norms favourable to drug use
- school suspensions
- arrests (Hemphill et al. 2009).

When examining the effects of all these risk and protective factors simultaneously, the authors found that the strongest predictor of violent behaviour at the second assessment, in both the US and Australian samples, was pre-existing violent behaviour at the first assessment (Hemphill et al. 2009). While some risk factors associated with peers, family,



school and community influences showed a predictive influence in early analyses, these become nonsignificant when adjusting for initial levels of violent behaviour. The authors noted this supported the need for violence to be addressed in childhood or early adolescence when violent behavioural pathways were being formed (Hemphill et al. 2009).

Another study looked at risk factors for violence and gang membership in a sample of 5,395 8th grade students (around 14 years old) in 11 cities across the United States (Esbensen et al. 2009). It looked at the influence of risk factors across the domains of ethnicity, individual psychology, family factors, peers and schooling. The study found that for both violence and gang membership, the likelihood of violent offending increased exponentially with increases in the number of risk factors. Of the 18 risk factors examined, peer factors such as having few prosocial peers, delinquent peers, time spent with peers using drugs and alcohol and time spent with peers in the absence of adults, were the most strongly predictive of violent offending (Esbensen et al. 2009). Family and school factors had relatively little influence in this sample, suggesting to the authors either that these factors had diminishing importance in mid-adolescence, or that these may tend to operate in an interactive way through other factors rather than as independent influences.

A number of criminological theories have been developed in an attempt to explain the contribution of social and economic factors to violent and other crime, however these are often not subjected to empirical assessment. A recent Australian study examined the efficacy of the major theoretical paradigms in explaining violence among Indigenous Australians (Snowball & Weatherburn 2007). The authors of this study examined Indigenous violent offending on the basis of cultural theory perspectives that draw on observations about the tendency of Indigenous people to respond violently to minor conflicts, and on archaeological and anthropological evidence to contend that violence has traditionally been a part of Indigenous culture. Many scholars argue that Indigenous violence results from the effects of colonisation and the treatment of Indigenous people by mainstream society.

Working from traditional criminological theories, the authors sought to find support in the available evidence for the following major theoretical paradigms:

- anomie theory – which, from a cultural perspective focused on Indigenous people, posits that colonisation and dispossession have stripped away Indigenous people's sense of meaning, value and purpose, undermining the capacity of Indigenous communities to control the antisocial behaviour of members
- social disorganisation theory – which suggests that colonisation and dispossession have led to a breakdown of Indigenous social structures, resulting in a loss of informal social controls
- social deprivation theory – which attributes violence in Indigenous communities to the impacts of economic and social disadvantage, seeing violence as resulting either from the strain of these disadvantages or from rebellion against social exclusion
- lifestyle/routine activity theory – which sees alcohol and drug abuse as largely responsible for Indigenous violence.



The study drew on the 2002 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) data. Using multivariate analysis, the authors found little support for the anomie theory, but some for the social disorganisation and social deprivation theories (Snowball & Weatherburn 2007). However, they found strong support for the lifestyle/routine activity theory, primarily through their finding that high-risk alcohol consumption was the single strongest risk factor for Indigenous violent victimisation. Its influence greatly outweighed factors measuring social disadvantage or social disorganisation. While the results of this study do not necessarily generalise to the broader population, or young Australians specifically, they do provide evidence of the importance of alcohol and drug use, and socio-economic disadvantage in contributing to crime.

Statistics from Victoria police indicate that young people from disadvantaged northern and western suburbs are disproportionately responsible for assaults in the Melbourne CBD (Millar 2009). This further suggests the contributory role of structural factors (such as disadvantage, lack of resources and poverty) and situational factors (such as access to public transport) in violent offending.

ToR4: Links between illicit drug use, alcohol abuse and violence among young Australians

There is a strong body of evidence showing an association between alcohol use and violence (eg, Graham & Homel 2008). Using data from 2004-05, it was estimated that alcohol-related crime costs Australia \$1.7 billion per year, including \$124 million for the costs associated with loss of life due to alcohol-related violent crime (Collins & Lapsley 2007). Findings from the National Drug Strategy Household Survey in 2007 showed that:

- 1 in 4 Australians were a victim of alcohol-related verbal abuse
- 13 percent were made to feel fearful by an intoxicated person
- 4.5 percent of Australians aged 14 years or older had been physically abused by someone under the influence of alcohol (AIHW 2008).

A large number of studies have found a positive correlation between the density of licensed premises and the likelihood of alcohol-related violence. Areas with higher alcohol sales volumes have been shown to have higher rates of assault, malicious damage to property and offensive behaviour (Stevenson 1996). Modelling showed that reducing to mean levels the volumes of alcohol sold in high volume postcodes could markedly reduce incidents of violent and damaging behaviour.

Another study identified several major 'hot spots' for assault in inner Sydney, concentrated on busy commercial streets with numerous entertainment and licensed premises (Jochelson 1997). Further, a spatial analysis model for examining the relationship between outlet density and assaults found a non-linear relationship between the two (Livingston 2008).



Based on 223 postcodes in Melbourne, rates of assault were found to increase in an accelerated fashion as the density of hotels increased. The results suggest that while alcohol-related assaults increase with hotel density, there may be a point after which each additional outlet contributes an increasing number of additional assaults.

In an AIC study of juveniles in detention, 70 percent of these youths reported being under the influence of substances at the time of committing the offences for which they were detained (Prichard & Payne 2005). This was a higher rate of substance use while offending than reported by incarcerated adult males (62%) or incarcerated adult females (58%; Makkai & Payne 2003; Johnson 2004). The youths were roughly equally likely to have been using drugs, alcohol or a combination of drugs and alcohol at the time of offending (Prichard & Payne 2005). Approximately one-third (36%) of the juvenile offenders in this sample reported having suffered violent abuse, typically from parents or guardians.

An AIC report on risk factors for violent victimisation among Indigenous Australians showed that the likelihood of a person being victimised, with persons engaging in high-risk alcohol use being approximately twice as likely to experience violent victimisation as persons engaging in low-risk alcohol use (Bryant & Willis 2008).

ToR5: Strategies to reduce violence and its impact among young Australians

Early intervention and prevention programs are critical in the fight against juvenile crime and violence. There is a great deal of evidence that suggests that police practices can also have an impact on crime (Sherman et al 1998). It should be noted however that while some police practices can reduce crime, others may have no impact, and still others may actually inadvertently increase crime. Importantly, police often come into contact with at-risk young people before other agencies. As such, they can play a crucial role in reducing youth violence.

The following provides a brief outline of key policing strategies in relation to youth violence.

Key strategies in best practice for policing youth violence

It is relatively rare to find rigorous research on policing program outcomes. Most programs (if evaluated at all) tend to be assessed via quasi-experimental or qualitative methods that don't provide the certainty of more experimental research that positive program outcomes can be attributed to particular police interventions. However, some programs that haven't been evaluated rigorously nonetheless show promise. These programs may be supported by anecdotal evidence, or have been recognised for their innovation (e.g. by the Australian Crime and Violence Prevention Awards). Despite the limitations of available research evidence, when the evidence base is assessed in its entirety, key themes emerge in relation to best practice for policing young people. These are described below and effective and/or



promising programs that can demonstrate the utility of these principles in policing interventions are highlighted.

1. Targeted approaches

The key factor highlighted by Sherman et al's (1998: 2-13) overview of what works in preventing crime was that funding for crime reduction approaches need to be appropriately targeted to areas of greatest need: "evidence increasingly suggests the effectiveness of much greater concentration of...funding in the neighbourhoods which need police the most".

2. Tailored approaches

One size doesn't fit all. As outlined below, policing strategies have varied impacts on different cohorts of young people (Indigenous young people, young women etc). Policing strategies need to be tailored, as much as possible to meet the diverse needs and offending behaviours of young people. Recognising "context" has been identified as a key factor in developing successful crime prevention projects in rural and remote communities (AIC forthcoming; Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth [ARACY] 2009).

3. Timeliness of responses to young people

As young people's memories are still developing, approaches that offer immediate responses to young people's offending behaviour are likely to be more successful than those (such as courts) that involve lengthy delays.

4. Early intervention and prevention

Police cannot always be involved in community development strategies and social programs that aim to prevent crime. Policing initiatives that target offenders at young ages and/or early in their career trajectories are nonetheless critical.

5. Trust- and relationship-building in communities

Evidence has shown that citizens with high levels of trust in the criminal justice system are more likely than others to obey the law. Policing approaches that increase this trust, and build healthy relationships with communities, are likely to have positive long-term impacts on levels of violence. Involving members of the community has been identified as a key strategy for preventing crime in rural and remote communities (AIC forthcoming), and enhancing young people's participation in prosocial activities (ARACY 2009).



6. Respectful interactions with young people

Evidence has shown that offenders who are treated in a respectful manner by criminal justice personnel are less likely than those treated disrespectfully to re-offend. Modelling respectful behaviour to young people could thus be an important strategy for police to adopt.

7. Collaborative responses

A number of successful programs, including those outlined above, rely on extensive interagency collaboration, typically among police, youth workers, the community sector and young people.

8. Sending clear messages to young people

A number of the promising programs described above aim to send clear and immediate responses to young people about their offending behaviour (e.g. 'pulling levers'). It appears that this type of response, which is developmentally appropriate for young people, delivered in an inclusive and respectful way, may assist police to reduce youth violence.

9. Targeting substance misuse

The role of alcohol and other drugs in youth violence has been well established (ARACY 2009; Wagenaar, Murray & Toomey 2000; World Health Organisation 2006). The misuse of alcohol in particular has been raised as an important factor to address in order to improve the lives of young Australians (Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy 2009). Policing initiatives that seek to address the misuse of alcohol and other drugs by young people may assist in the reduction of violence among this group.



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