



Government of Western Australia
Department of the Premier and Cabinet
Office of the Director General

Submission No. 75

(Youth Violence)

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

Inquiry into the Impact of Violence on Young Australians

My apologies for the delay in responding to the Committee's request for a submission to this inquiry.

Please find attached a copy of the Western Australian Government's submission, forwarded by the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, on behalf of the Minister for Youth, the Hon Donna Faragher MLC.

Yours sincerely

Peter Conran
DIRECTOR GENERAL

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11 MAR 2010

House of Representatives' *Inquiry* *Into the Impact of Violence on* *Young Australians*

**Submission from the Western Australian
Department of the Premier and Cabinet
on behalf of the Minister for Youth**

February 2010

The following information and advice provide a youth policy perspective on the issues raised by the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry.

The Green Paper referred to in this document can be provided to the Standing Committee upon request.

1. Perceptions of violence and community safety among young Australians

The most comprehensive analysis of the views of young Australians on a variety of issues and concerns is the *National Survey of Young Australians 2009*, Mission Australia 2009¹. Pages 120–123 of the *National Survey* show violence to be among the top priority concerns for young people. Close to a quarter of WA respondents identified physical/sexual abuse and personal safety as top issues of concern.

2. Links between illicit drug use, alcohol abuse and violence among young Australians

Alcohol is involved in 62 per cent of all police attendances and 73 per cent of assaults across Australia.² Most of the alcohol problems for young people occur due to intoxication. These include:

- being the victim of violence (physical or verbal) or being violent themselves;
- having unprotected sex or not being able to deal with unwanted sexual advances;
- being sexually assaulted;
- alcohol poisoning and loss of consciousness;
- being injured while swimming, playing sport, climbing, crossing a busy street, and the dangers of drink-driving are well known;
- difficulty coping with school and/or work commitments;
- having money problems because of the amount spent on alcohol;
- breaking the law or getting into trouble with the police;
- losing control of themselves and harming friendships; and
- disappointing parents and other important adults.³

Drinking is a major factor in much of the injury resulting from road crashes and other accidents, and in social problems such as violence, family breakdown and child abuse and neglect. As such, alcohol-related harm is not restricted to individual drinkers but has relevance for families, bystanders and the broader community.⁴

While illicit drug use generally attracts significantly higher levels of concern within the general community than the use of alcohol and tobacco, research consistently shows that use of these drugs exacts a far higher economic toll than does the use of all illicit drugs combined.

In the financial year 1998–99, alcohol, tobacco and illicit drug use cost Australia an estimated \$34.4 billion in health care, law enforcement and lost productivity. Of this total, \$6.1 billion was attributed to the costs associated with illicit drug use (with the largest proportion relating to the costs of crime), while alcohol cost \$7.1 billion (largely through lost productivity and road accidents), and tobacco cost \$21.2 billion (with the largest proportion of the costs related to loss of life).⁵ In 2008, the federal government estimated that alcohol-related social problems cost the Australian community \$15.3 billion.⁶

¹ http://www.missionaustralia.com.au/document-downloads/cat_view/132-national-survey-of-young-australians-2009

² [www.alcohol.gov.au/internet/alcohol/publishing.nsf/Content/B83AD1F91AA632ADCA25718E0081F1C3/\\$File/nas-06-09-2.pdf](http://www.alcohol.gov.au/internet/alcohol/publishing.nsf/Content/B83AD1F91AA632ADCA25718E0081F1C3/$File/nas-06-09-2.pdf)

³ www.alcohol.gov.au/internet/alcohol/publishing.nsf/content/brochure-teen-alcohol

⁴ www.nhmrc.gov.au/your_health/healthy/alcohol/index.htm

⁵ "Prevention of substance use, risk and harm in Australia – a review of the evidence." W. Loxley, J.W. Toumbourou, T. Stockwell, National Drug Research Institute and the Centre for Adolescent Health, 2004.

⁶ www.drinkingnightmare.gov.au/internet/drinkingnightmare/publishing.nsf/Content/about-the-campaign#footnote9

In recent years anecdotal evidence indicates that amphetamine use has amplified the problem of alcohol-fuelled violence, by extending the time that people are drunk and prone to getting into fights. The energy and speed provided by the amphetamine, combined with the reduced inhibition and cognitive ability provided by the alcohol, may also make the violence more severe than alcohol-fuelled violence alone.

Illicit drug use is associated with specific aspects of violence. Illicit drug use is a violence risk factor particularly impacting upon young men⁷. For example, use of anabolic steroids has been shown to increase aggression, violence and irrational behaviour.

Psycho-stimulant users (in WA, amphetamine-type substances are of particular significance) are more prone to violent outbursts because psycho-stimulants promote a 'fight or flight' reaction in the nervous system which, in turn, can override the ability of the brain's upper cortex to modulate reactions to perceived aggression. Evidence shows that, even months after last use, psycho-stimulant users may remain hypersensitive to sudden or unexpected events, reacting with a 'fight or flight' response.

Unfortunately many users will also experience 'psycho-stimulant psychosis' — a psychotic state almost indistinguishable from acute paranoid schizophrenia — after binge or prolonged use, with a concomitant increased risk of violence. Cannabis use also appears to be associated with an increased risk of psychosis and other mental health conditions in those who are already vulnerable to such conditions.

The illicit drug trade is itself a major contributor to violence, with organised crime involvement being linked to serious assaults and murders. Other illicit drug use is also linked with violence. Heroin use for example is clearly associated with increased levels of robbery in order to support this expensive addiction.⁸

Volatile substance use (such as glue and solvent sniffing) is predominantly a young persons' issue. Continued volatile substances use and dependence is associated primarily with young people experiencing, or at risk of, other social problems such as crime and truancy. The effect of volatile substances is similar to high levels of alcohol intoxication and is associated with higher risks of impulsive and violent behaviours.

Adolescents are more likely to use drugs if they associate with other young people who are using drugs. Delinquency, sensation seeking and favourable attitudes to drug use are all risk factors, but the influence of adolescent anxiety and depression is unclear. Young people are also at increased risk when there are favourable parental attitudes towards drugs and higher levels of community drug use and disadvantage.

Protective factors include religious involvement, good parent-adolescent communication, involvement in sport and school retention. Adolescents with a high level of risk factors and a low level of protective factors are more likely to use all types of drugs in a potentially harmful manner.⁹

⁷ *Preventing Violence: The State Community Violence Prevention Strategy 2005 A Green Paper Policy Framework for Development*, page 87.

⁸ *The Impact of Heroin Dependence on Long-Term Robbery Trends*, Chilvers, M., and Weatherburn, D., NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Sydney, 2003.

⁹ "Prevention of substance use, risk and harm in Australia – a review of the evidence" (summary document). W. Loxley, J.W. Toumbourou, T. Stockwell, National Drug Research Institute and the Centre for Adolescent Health, 2004.

3. The relationship between bullying and violence on the wellbeing of young Australians

A number of recent deaths of teenagers across the country which have been linked to cyber bullying have increased concern over the issue.¹⁰

On 3 August 2009, Federal Education Minister Julia Gillard announced a \$3 million plan to examine the safety of children in e-communications and the effectiveness of cyber-safety programs in schools. The anti-cyber bullying pilot, which will roll out in 150 schools across the country, will report its findings by June 2010.¹¹

In Western Australia the Department of Education (DoE) promotes safe and supportive school environments through the effective management of student behaviour. The policy involves mandatory procedures for schools to ensure that they deal effectively with inappropriate student behaviour, and that students develop positive pro-social behaviours.

Edith Cowan University's Child Health Promotion Research Centre (CHPRC) has been conducting research into cyber bullying since 2007. CHPRC's current research projects on cyber bullying are:

1. the Cyber-Friendly Schools Project, funded to July 2010 by the Public Education Endowment Trust to engage schools, students and parents to develop evidence-based and cost-effective policy, practice and strategies to reduce cyber bullying; and
2. the Cyber Friendly Parents' Intervention Trial and Cyber Friendly Parents' Project, funded to 2011 by the Telstra Foundation, to develop and implement a parent education intervention program designed to reduce cyber bullying.¹²

Cyber bullying can result in:

- students being worried about getting into a fight, or being expelled;
- students feeling threatened, annoyed, afraid or worried at lunch times;
- low self esteem;
- anger;
- depression;
- school absenteeism;
- poor grades; and
- suicide.

The Australian Institute of Criminology (2009) estimates that assault costs the Australian community \$1.4 billion each year (including medical costs, lost output and intangible costs such as fear, pain and suffering but not including the costs of insurance, compensation, security, policing etc).¹³

¹⁰ See www.news.com.au/heraldsun/story/0,21985,25106249-2862,00.html;
www.abcnews.go.com/GMA/Story?id=3882520; and www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,25817893-2702,00.html

¹¹ www.australianit.news.com.au/story/0,25197,25873793-15306,00.html

¹² www.chpru.ecu.edu.au/research/current/cyberfriendly.php#cyberfriendlyparents

¹³ www.aracy.org.au/cmsdocuments/Preventing_Youth_Violence_Rationale_180809.pdf

4. Social and economic factors that contribute to violence by young Australians

A number of the causes of youth violence are known:

- many different factors are involved (such as those relating to the individual, their family, friends, school, neighbourhood, community, society, culture); and
- different factors interact differently in different social, physical and built environments to produce different outcomes.

There is no single cause and no simple solution. There are, however, particular influences that are known to either increase or decrease the risks.

Young people are especially vulnerable due to major changes occurring in many areas of their life from early adolescence onwards.

Changes in the brain during adolescence affect:

- how young people think and feel (including how they respond to stress, how they regulate their emotions and how they interpret emotions in others);
- how they behave (including increases in risk-taking behaviours); and
- how they respond to environmental influences (both good and bad).

There is a strong link between violence and drugs. As indicated above, the major drug of concern is alcohol but other drugs contribute to and exacerbate the overall impact of violence on young people. Statistics indicate that there is a link between violence and excessive alcohol consumption.¹⁴

See also:

www.rch.org.au/emplibrary/cah/1_PM.pdf

www.news.com.au/couriermail/story/0,,24096151-27197,00.html

[www.aracy.org.au/cmsdocuments/Preventing Youth Violence Rationale 180809.pdf](http://www.aracy.org.au/cmsdocuments/Preventing_Youth_Violence_Rationale_180809.pdf)

5. Strategies to reduce violence and its impact among young Australians

In 2005, WA Government agencies, led by WA Police, developed a comprehensive approach to preventing community violence.¹⁵ A Green Paper outlining the proposed strategy was well received during public consultation and had strong agency commitment. The WA Minister for Youth is currently considering the Green Paper.

The approach advocated in the Paper is comprehensive and allows for a mix of systemic change, long term prevention, early intervention in at-risk youth, targeted interventions in violence hot spots and intensified policing efforts to be linked through whole-of-government and whole-of-community prioritised action. As stated previously, a copy of the Green Paper can be provided to the Committee upon request.

¹⁴ http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/gi_0199-2658461/Reflections-on-youth-violence.html

¹⁵ *Preventing Violence: The State Community Violence Prevention Strategy 2005 A Green Paper Policy Framework for Development*