

Submission No. 45

(Youth Violence)

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Submission to the House Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth

Inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians

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Table of Contents

Term of Reference 1	5
1. Perceptions of violence and community safety among young Australians	5
1.1 Places of Violence	5
1.1.1 Home.....	6
1.1.2 Dating Relationships.....	6
1.1.3 School	6
1.1.4 Public Spaces.....	7
1.2 Perceptions of Violence	7
1.2.1 Conflict Resolution.....	7
Term of Reference 2	8
2. Links between illicit drug use, alcohol abuse and violence among young Australians	8
Term of Reference 3	10
3. The relationship between bullying and violence on the wellbeing of young Australians	10
3.1 Effect on Brain Development	10
3.2 Emotional and Social Wellbeing	10
Term of Reference 4	12
4. Social and economic factors that contribute to violence by young Australians	12
4.1 Community/Locational Disadvantage.....	12
4.2 Family Conflict and Violence	13
4.3 Peer Pressure	13
4.4 School/Falling through the Gaps.....	14
Term of Reference 5	16
5. Strategies to reduce violence and its impact among young Australians	16
5.1 Managing Behaviours in Schools.....	16
5.2 Schools as a Hub	16
5.3 Supporting young families	17
5.4 Accessible Behaviour Change Programs.....	18
References	20

Inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians

UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians. Bullying and violence impacts significantly on many of our service users. This inquiry offered a opportunity to consult widely with young people on how violence impacts their lives.

UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families (CYPF or the Service Group) is a service group of UnitingCare NSW.ACT and is part of the community services work of the Uniting Church of Australia. Our concerns for social justice and the needs of children, young people and families who are disadvantaged inform the way we serve and represent people and communities. The Service Group includes UnitingCare Burnside, UnitingCare Unifam, UnitingCare Disability and the Institute of Family Practice. Together we form one of the largest providers of services to support children and families in NSW.

In 2008-2009, UnitingCare Burnside provided services for over two thousand vulnerable young people in Western and South West Sydney, the Central Coast, Dubbo, Goulburn and the Mid North Coast. These services work with young people who are:

- living in out of home care or accessing aftercare services
- homeless or at risk of homelessness
- at risk of harm due to family distress
- at risk of disengaging from education.

All of our services actively encourage young people to participate in submissions and advocacy to government. In preparing this submission we consulted widely with our service users and staff. We conducted focus groups with service users, group interviews with staff and provided questionnaires for both staff and service users to assist with interviews between caseworkers from our youth services and young people.

The strength of this submission is in the stories of our service users and our staff. We have listened carefully to their voices and experiences.

The impact of violence and bullying on children and young people is a very complex issue. Children and young people can experience violence at home, at school, on the sports field, at parties, on the street and with their friends. This violence often has a serious impact on the wellbeing of children and young people and can affect their brain development and emotional and social development. When exposed to further risk factors such as alcohol and other drugs, media influence, peer pressure and social and educational disadvantage children and young people may be more at risk of displaying violent or antisocial behaviours.

However, there are multiple intervention points where the impact of violence on children and young people can be addressed. Probably the most important point for addressing violent behaviour is within the education system. Schools enable prevention and early intervention programs to reach a large number of young people and present a valuable opportunity to provide support for children and young people who are displaying or experiencing violent or antisocial behaviour.

Term of Reference 1

1. Perceptions of violence and community safety among young Australians

"Violence can happen anywhere and at any time"

-Young person's response to a questionnaire

"It's everywhere these days"

-Focus group participant

"I'm too scared to walk around, paranoid"

-Young person in an interview with a caseworker

Anecdotal evidence and research indicates that violence in Australia is increasing for young Australians. Increasing levels of violence are being experienced in the home, school, with friends and on the street. For example the number of young people charged with assault has risen by 48 percent from 1997 to 2007 (Williams et al 2009). The types of violence experienced by young people include physical, emotional, sexual, social and financial violence. Even withholding money as a means to hurt or control someone is a form of violence. Violence can either be a premeditated event or a reaction to something. Policy responses must recognise and respond to the different types of violence that impact on young people.

Research indicates that young people experience violence at a much higher rate than older Australians. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2008) indicates that young men aged 18-24 years report physical assault by another male at a rate of almost five times higher (19%) than men over 25 (4%). Of this age group, the 18-19 year old males were the most likely to report physical assault (29%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008). Women aged 18-24 years are also more likely to experience violence than women over the age of 25. Almost double the number of women aged 18-24 years experienced violence in the last 12 months than those over the age of 25 (Flood and Fergus 2008).

Consultation with our service providers and service users together with our internal data support the research indicating that violence is an increasing problem for young people in New South Wales. In the first six months of 2009, 37% of young people accessing Burnside's youth services had been a victim of crime within the previous 12 months. In addition, every staff member and service user involved in the consultations stated that young people they know or work with often experience violence. Even young people who are not victims or perpetrators of violence may have long-term emotional or psychological damage due to witnessing violent incidents.

1.1 Places of Violence

"Young people experience violence at school, in the classrooms, in the playgrounds, by mobile phones and in internet chat rooms. They experience violence in the community in peer social settings, as well as within their homes"

- Burnside staff member

Violence can occur in the home, the school, in relationships or in public spaces. Violence that occurs in a home or school setting or that is perpetrated by a family

member or partner is particularly concerning as it is in these settings or with these people that children and young people should feel safe.

1.1.1 Home

The Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies reports that “1 in 3 young people aged between 12 and 20 had witnessed domestic violence in the home”. (Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies 2008).

“I had violence at home from my stepdad [which] got DoCS to take us all away from home”

-Young person in an interview with a caseworker

Many young people experience violence when family breaks down, become homeless. This is how I experience violence through my youth growing up.

-Young person’s response to a questionnaire

1.1.2 Dating Relationships

The Attorney-General’s Department reports that physical violence in a ‘dating’ relationship has been experienced by about one-third of all boys and girls (National Crime Prevention 2000). By the time young people have reached 20 years of age almost half of all young people who have been in a relationship have experienced physical violence (National Crime Prevention 2000).

1.1.3 School

Consultations with our staff and service users indicate that violence and bullying in schools is a major concern for young people. Data from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research indicates that from June 2008 to July 2009 there were 1249 incidents of assaults on school premises in NSW as reported by the NSW police force (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 2009, pers.comm. 20 Oct). This is an increase of almost 12 percent from the previous year. Bullying in school is not limited to physical violence. Many young people experience verbal bullying, as well as bullying by text message and on internet forums, such as MySpace and Facebook.

“[I experienced] verbal abuse and bullying at school and I think this happened because I was in the special ed class. No one in mainstream classes likes special ed kids [...] I listened to my mp4 player with headphones after school at the bus stop so I couldn’t hear [them] anymore”

- Young person in an interview with a caseworker

Emailing, texting and phone calls are another gateway to bully someone out of school.

- Young person’s response to a questionnaire

Recent stories in the media have demonstrated the serious impact that bullying can have on a young person. The mother of a 14-year-old girl who committed suicide in July of this year said that she believed that cyber bullying contributed to her daughter’s death (Dikeos 2009). This was the fourth suicide at this school in six months. In October of this year a coronial inquest heard that the suicide of a 14-year-old boy last year occurred after the boy had experienced physical and cyber bullying at his school (Howden 2009). Consultations with our service users indicate that many young people feel unsupported at school when bullying or violence is an issue.

1.1.4 Public Spaces

While the conventional wisdom about bullying puts it clearly within the school yard, many of our service users were quick to point out in consultations that bullying occurs out of school too. The young people that subject them to bullying within school hours do not go away once the bell rings. Bullying is just as likely to occur at the shopping centre, at a party, on the street or in the sportsground.

Almost a quarter (22.9%) of young people who responded to a recent National survey by Mission Australia listed personal safety as a major concern for them (Mission Australia 2009), and it is young men who are most at risk of experiencing violence in public settings. According to a 2005 survey by the ABS "Of men aged 18-24 years who were physically assaulted by a male, most (77%) reported being attacked by a stranger" (Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies 2008, p.3). The consumption of alcohol or other drugs is the most often cause of violence in public places, and assault against young men was most likely to occur at a licensed premises (Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies 2008, p.3).

There is a lot of violence in [public] housing estates. There is violence because they are bored [...] and they think that they can just get away with anything, which they do.

- Young person's response to a questionnaire

"I work in a club and due to having to refuse a patron alcohol I had a glass thrown at me"

- Young person's response to a questionnaire

Recommendation:

1. That the government support initiatives that build broader community-based awareness about the pervasiveness of bullying within the community.

1.2 Perceptions of Violence

1.2.1 Conflict Resolution

Our consultations suggest that violence is often perceived as the way to resolve conflict and the impact it has on another person is not always carefully considered or understood. Young people who experience violence in the home often have not had exposure to other ways to resolve conflict. As a result any conflict a young person experiences can quickly escalate into violence.

"They don't know how to deal with other life problems because they've been shown how to deal with problems using violence"

- Young person in an interview with a caseworker

Term of Reference 2

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

In response to the question 'what makes young people violent towards each other?':

Drug and alcohol consumption does contribute to violence amongst young people.

Mainly around this town it would be mostly drugs and alcohol.

Drug and alcohol use definitely.

-Young people in interviews with caseworkers.

From primary school, alcohol and other drug use is identified as a significant cause of violence for young people. Service users and staff described alcohol and other drug use as one of the main contributors to violence. They explained that the effects from using alcohol or other drugs can often trigger violent behaviour, especially when a young person is feeling overwhelmed or stressed.

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (Williams et al 2009) recently conducted a study with young people in Year 6 and Year 8 on the factors associated with violent and antisocial behaviours. In Year 6 almost 40% of boys had tried alcohol, and 20% had consumed alcohol within the last month (Williams et al 2009). By Year 8, 57% of boys had tried alcohol and almost ten percent were binge drinking (Williams et al 2009). The percentage of girls who were drinking alcohol was only slightly lower. These numbers are particularly concerning given the correlation between alcohol and violence shown by ARACY.

Those who have ever consumed alcohol, or consumed alcohol in the previous month were approximately three-and-a-half times as likely to have been violent in the previous year and six times as likely to have participated in antisocial behaviour. Among those who had engaged in binge drinking in the previous two weeks, the likelihood of having been violent was over five times higher than non-binge drinkers. (Williams et al 2009, p.29)

A national survey in 2003 of 800 15-17 year olds also found that alcohol and violence were closely linked. Over two-thirds of those surveyed had witnessed violence within three months of the survey by someone who was under the influence of alcohol and 39 percent had been threatened by someone who was drunk (Australian Clearing House for Youth Studies 2008).

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) young men aged 18 to 24 most frequently report that physical violence occurs at licensed premises (44%). "The majority (79%) of 18-24 year old men who were physically assaulted by another male said that the perpetrator had been drinking alcohol or taking drugs. Just over one-third (34%) also said that they themselves had been drinking or taking drugs". Of the young women aged 18 to 24 who were physically assaulted by a man, 37% reported that he had been drinking or taking drugs (Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies 2009).

According to respected child protection expert Professor Dorothy Scott (2009) the problem of alcohol abuse by young people is so extensive that it must be addressed through community-based approaches. She states, "It cannot be solved solely by

services. It requires population-based measures” such as restricting or taxing alcohol and banning alcohol advertising (Scott 2009, p.38).

Recommendation:

2. That the Inquiry recommend a comprehensive population-based approach to addressing substance abuse in line with Dorothy Scott’s recommendations to create an integrated approach including prevention, early intervention and tertiary treatment strategies.

Term of Reference 3

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

Bullying and violence often have a serious effect on a person's wellbeing. While violence can result in physical injuries which are quite apparent, it can also have less obvious effects on brain development and emotional and social development. The Australian Medical Association has identified that 'harsh parenting', abuse or neglect and conflict or violence are risk factors that can impact on a child or young person's development (Australian Medical Association 2006). The impact of violence on young people can be particularly serious due to their age and the elasticity of the brain during its development. Furthermore research into the impact of violence on children has found "long-term adverse outcomes in terms of intellectual and cognitive functioning and mental health problems including depressions" (Flood and Fergus 2008).

3.1 Effect on Brain Development

During childhood and adolescence the brain is highly elastic and is continuing to develop and make connections. These connections are influenced by a child or young person's experiences and effect their "behaviour, impulse control, decision making, judgement, planning and other higher order cognitive functions" (Rose and Atkins 2006 p.7). Research into brain development has found that experiences of trauma can shut off some of the connections in the pre-frontal cortex and as a result effect the brain's development (Australian Childhood Foundation 2009). Further research on brain development indicates that An underdeveloped pre-frontal cortex can result in poor communication skills, risk-taking activities, difficulty in problem-solving, heightened emotional reactions and poor judgment (Australian Childhood Foundation 2009). With growing physiological and psychological evidence of the effects of trauma and abuse (which may often be linked to violent experiences in childhood) it is clear that violence has the capacity to significantly and adversely impact children's safety and wellbeing.

3.2 Emotional and Social Wellbeing

"A young female I worked with received in the space of 45 minutes, 30 abusive text messages on her mobile phone from other girls at school. The bullying she received forced her to change schools four times. The bullying resulted in low self-esteem and a diagnosis of depression"

-Burnside staff member

Flood and Fergus (2008) identify the following ways in which violence is likely to impact on a young person's emotional wellbeing:

- higher rate of depression and anxiety
- greater risk of alcohol or drug abuse later in life
- increased behavioural issues
- higher rate of aggression
- symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder
- lower self-esteem

While it is not inevitable that every child and young person exposed to violence will experience these impacts, it is a concern that exposure to violence clearly increases this risk. Furthermore, as discussed in term of reference one, it is clear that young

people exposed to continued violence or bullying may at risk of ongoing mental health issues.

Bullying and violence can affect the relationships children and young people have with family members, friends and other people in their lives.

Once I thought these guys were mates but they hung out with me knowing I had money and they rolled me and put me in a coma. I couldn't fight back 'cause there were too many of them but it changed the way I think of people as friends these days.

-Young person's response to a questionnaire

As the quote above demonstrates, bullying and violence can erode a young person's ability to trust and become friends with other people. As a way of dealing with bullying or violence, children and young people may learn to become the bully, or alternatively may try to become the peacemaker (Flood and Fergus 2008). Bullying and violence may also affect their outcomes at school or in employment, which can create further problems, in particular, their capacity to maintain healthy, positive relationships in later life.

The many symptoms discussed above are likely to further impact on a child or young person's wellbeing. Children and young people with poor social and emotional wellbeing are more likely to have poor outcomes and engage in antisocial behaviour (Eckersley and Reeder 2008). A study of 10,000 children and young people in Australia found that those with low social and emotional wellbeing are more likely to exhibit "negative emotions and behaviours, including feeling stressed, angry and lonely, and underachieving in school. They tended to bully more, feel they didn't belong, not get along with their classmates, were less likely to volunteer and help others, and to feel disconnected from home, school and community. They had significant developmental delays in social and emotional skills and values, and in attitudes and coping skills" (Eckersley and Reeder 2008, p.16).

Term of Reference 4

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

The consultations with our service users and staff identified a number of factors that are believed to contribute to violence by young Australians. These factors include locational disadvantage, family violence, peer pressure and gaps in the education system, as well as media violence and alcohol and drug use as discussed previously. Interestingly, the factors identified in our consultations correlate with the risk factors identified in a recent report by Williams et al (2009) for the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth. The report concludes that as the number of risk factors increase in a child or young person's life, so too does the likelihood that they will engage in problem behaviours, including violence. These risk factors are particularly likely to impact young people who are, as a service user said, "already angry about life and needing attention".

Williams et al (2009) have separated these risk factors into community, family, school and peer-individual domains. These are explored below.

4.1 Community/Locational Disadvantage

The community in which a young person lives can influence their experience of violence. Williams et al (2009) have identified that low community attachment and community disorganisation are two risk factors that increase a child or young person's likelihood that they will engage in violence (Williams et al 2009).

Some service users we spoke with identified that their children are often treated poorly and feel stigmatised due to the area that they live in.

People treat the kids differently if they come from [location].¹ They are rougher and more judgemental.

Kids pick up on it [the stigma of the place] from when they are two or three. The kids see how their parents are treated when they come from [location].

-Focus group participants

This has a two-fold effect on children and young people. Firstly, they may grow up feeling worthless or discriminated against due to the treatment they experience. Secondly, children and young people may feel that they must meet the stereotype of the area that they come from, such as acting aggressively or being involved in anti-social behaviours.

Statistics indicate that certain communities are more likely to experience violence. Williams et al (2009) found that the likelihood of violent behaviour increases as the community's socio-economic status decreases. Furthermore, areas of social and economic disadvantage experience higher rates of reported domestic violence (Flood and Fergus 2008). These statistics do not equate violence with economic disadvantage. Rather, the statistics indicate that these communities contain a greater number of risk factors, lack the same access to resources, and often face greater hardships which in turn impacts on feelings of powerlessness and exclusion.

¹ The names of the locations have been withheld to protect the identity of respondents.

4.2 Family Conflict and Violence

Family conflict, poor family management and a family history of antisocial behaviour are some of the risk factors identified by Williams et al (2009). These issues were also identified in our consultations.

In response to a question about what makes young people violent towards each other:

They see their parents being violent and they do it too.

-Focus group participants

I had family problems and I took it all to school. As soon as someone wanted to take their anger problems out on me I took revenge.

-Young person's response to a questionnaire

My father was very violent with his girlfriend and I was taken off my dad, and I had 9-10 months living in violence which showed me that violence was a way to deal with things. I missed out on learning life skills that are different to violence.

Family problems, violence at home, using violence to solve problems.

Role-modelling from family.

Their parents acting the same way, being brought up that way.

-Young people in interviews with caseworkers.

Many of the service users we consulted with stated that experiencing family violence influenced how they dealt with conflict in future relationships. Violence has been modelled in their families as the way to deal with any conflict or disagreement. Without alternative role-models many young people cannot choose alternate ways of dealing with conflict. As highlighted earlier, exposure to physical and emotional trauma and abuse can also impact on the young person's capacity to effectively control emotional impulses and regulate behaviour in assertive rather than aggressive ways.

Not all young people who witness family violence go on to become perpetrators of family violence and not all perpetrators of family violence were exposed to family violence as a child or young person. However, experiencing family violence does have a major impact on the opinions young people hold about violence. Young people who are exposed to family violence appear to develop quite polarized views, "either making them more accepting of domestic violence or highly intolerant of such violence" (National Crime Prevention 2000, p.2). Furthermore, research has found that young men who have witnessed domestic violence are more likely to become perpetrators of domestic violence than young men who have not witnessed domestic violence (Flood and Fergus 2008).

4.3 Peer Pressure

Many of the young people and caseworkers that we consulted with recounted incidents where young people have been pressured into violence. Interaction with anti-social peers, peer pressure or reward for antisocial behaviour and associating with friends who use drugs or alcohol are a few of the risk factors identified by Williams et al (2009).

You go to school and someone tries to get you into a fight, egg you on
-Young person in interview with caseworker

I am currently working with a young person who reports that she often experiences violence at school from fellow students. She states that her friends will 'egg her on' to hit other students they don't like, ending in the young person becoming a perpetrator and victim of violent retaliations.

-Burnside staff member

Peer pressure can be difficult for children and young people to resist, especially if their need for friendships and acceptance is quite high. The need for acceptance by their peers can cause the young person to become both the victim and the perpetrator in the same act.

4.4 School/Falling through the Gaps

Falling through gaps in the education system

-Young person's response in a questionnaire about what makes young people violent towards each other.

Williams et al (2009) have identified both 'school failure' and a low commitment to school as the two risk factors within the school domain that can increase a child or young person's likelihood that they will engage in violence. 'School failure' refers to a young person who may fall behind academically, particularly in Years 4 to 6. It does not refer to the school failing the young person. However, one must consider the gaps within the system that may allow a young person to fall so far behind their peers and to feel uncommitted to school.

The policy of suspending children and young people may be unintentionally contributing to these risk factors. In 2008 more than 10,000 children and young people were suspended from school for at least 10 days in NSW and 6,500 children and young people were suspended for violent behaviour (NSW DET 2008).

A survey in 2007 of children and young people placed with Burnside's programs in out-of-home care found that 40% of the children and young people who were suspended were not provided with school work to complete (UnitingCare Burnside 2008). When a child or young person is suspended it can cause them to disengage with their schooling, particularly if it is a long suspension or if they are regularly suspended and if no school work is provided during their suspension period. The opportunity to not attend school or complete any school work may also feel like a 'reward' to some children and young people and encourage them to get suspended again, effectively rewarding poor behaviour.

During a consultation with a Burnside parenting support program one parent talked about her 15-year-old son's frequent suspensions from a Behavioural School. She said that her son goes to school for a few days, gets in trouble and receives a 22-day suspension and then is suspended again after attending school for a few more days. She explained that he doesn't get enough support when he is out of school on suspension because no one is home to watch him. On suspension her son sleeps most of the day, gets up, plays the play station and then goes out to all hours in the night and bangs on the door at 3:00 in the morning to get back into the house. She doesn't feel like she can do much to intervene.

The example above demonstrates that suspension is a frequently used tool for punishing children and young people. However, in this situation it is clear that not

only does the young person and their parent feel disempowered, but so too does the school feel disempowered to try an alternate solution. This is particularly concerning considering that it is a school for children and young people with behavioural problems.

This approach is contradictory to research which suggests that building effective emotional regulation skills can only be done in the context of an active relationship. This indicates that exclusion is counterproductive to the outcomes being sought.

Term of Reference 5

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

5.1 Managing Behaviours in Schools

Statistics released by the NSW Department of Education and Training (2008) show that physical violence is the number one reason why children and young people are suspended from school with 45 percent suspended for physical violence last year. As discussed under the previous term of reference, CYPF service users and staff believe that school suspensions are not effective disciplining solutions and in some cases they can contribute to or exacerbate violent behaviour. If children and young people are to remain engaged with school and are to be taught effective techniques for dealing with their anger then out of school suspension is not the solution.

For young people whose parents or carers work or are unable to provide supervision during the day, suspension places these young people at greater risk. Without school providing a daily routine for them, these young people are more likely to disengage from school and the community. One service user recalled that when she received in-school suspension in high school it actually stopped her from misbehaving and she remained engaged with her school work. Schools must maintain communication with families in order to establish whether suspension will be an effective disciplining solution for the child or young person in question.

Furthermore, suspension does not address the reason why the young person has acted in a violent manner, nor does it provide the young person with practical alternatives for dealing with their anger. Service users noted that suspension simply moves the violence and bullying away from the school and out of adult eyes. It may also move the child closer to an abusive situation in the home. On a recent SBS television program a victim of abuse as a child talked about his experiences. He explained that he was a bully at school as a way of getting someone to notice what was happening. "I had turned into a bully at school, um, it was me putting my hand up saying teachers, please, see me for what I am and try and help me" (Insight 2009, p.1).

Schools must be able to provide an effective response to children and young people who act out with violent or aggressive behaviour. This response must take into account the needs of both the victim of the behaviour and the perpetrator, must work closely with the families to develop an appropriate response and must try to address the cause of the behaviour.

Recommendation:

3. That the Inquiry recommends that the State Department of Education review the policy of suspension and expulsion and implement alternative solutions that focus on behavioural change.

4. That the Inquiry recommends that schools place a greater emphasis on working collaboratively with families to address a child or young person's inappropriate behaviour.

5.2 Schools as a Hub

In spite of schools being a site for potential violence and bullying, they are also our most valuable resource for addressing bullying and violence within our communities. One of the Burnside youth programs recently conducted a survey with young people

in a regional area of NSW that addressed the idea of ‘stability’ and asked where these young people felt most stable. It was sobering to hear that many of these young people could not identify a time of real stability in their lives. However, 80 percent of these young people identified school as the place where they feel most stable. For young people who come from a disadvantaged background or who have had few safe places in their lives, school represents a place where they feel safe and can be protected and supported.

While children and young people are attending school there is a valuable opportunity to engage with them and provide them with the support that they may not receive at home. However, schools cannot be expected to provide quality education as well as comprehensive support without further resourcing. Several of the Burnside youth programs have recognised the need to work closely with the local schools in order to provide a support point for the teachers and to be able to quickly identify and work with those children and young people who are having difficulties.

Currently, successful support programs are running in some schools that work with both the victims and perpetrators of bullying or violent behaviour. For example, Reconnect, which aims to prevent family breakdown and youth homelessness by providing support, advocacy and mediation for young people and their families where the young person is homeless or at risk of homelessness, has developed some successful programs with schools. RAPT, our Reconnect program on the Central Coast, recently ran a group work program at a local high school. The group focused on a number of teenage girls who had been fighting with each other or finding it difficult to be friends. Since the program worked with these young people, the head teacher has reported that none of the girls have been experienced harassment or fighting. Another effective program that works with young people who are being bullied or who are having difficulties managing their behaviour is Activ8 – Becoming Assertive, developed by our Reconnect program in Macarthur.

Recommendation:

5. That the Inquiry recommends that schools work more closely with youth support programs in order to build up the resources and supports that they can offer their students.

6. That the Inquiry recommends that the Reconnect program continues to be implemented and expanded across Australia.

7. That the Inquiry recommends that increased resources are provided to schools to ensure delivery of counselling and/or group work.

5.3 Supporting young families

“Being brought up in a violence free environment”
-Young person’s response to a questionnaire

It is important to recognise that the transition to parenthood represents a key opportunity to address issues of violence in a relationship. It is well documented that violence in a family setting can have a negative impact on parental capacity and child well-being. However, young people who become parents may be more likely to break cycles of violence due to:

- access – young parents are more exposed to health and social service professionals during pregnancy and their child’s early infancy
- engagement – young parents are more likely to make positive life changes at this time (UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families 2008).

It is crucial that universal services are able to identify and address youth violence during this key intervention stage. Universal services include public health services such as sustained nurse-home visiting, social services such as Centrelink and early childhood education and care services. Appropriate referral to youth-specific family violence programs should be an established protocol in these services as part of a whole-of-government approach to youth violence and to violence against women and children.

Support programs such as nurse home visiting offer a service that can intervene early in the life of problems including family violence. Professor David Olds of the University of Colorado and his colleagues (2007) have identified a reduced rate of domestic violence exposure as a secondary outcome of Olds Model nurse home visiting. The Olds Model of postnatal home visiting programs is unique because it sends registered nurses to the family home rather than social workers or volunteers. Evaluations of the program have found that a 'registered nurse' is most readily accepted into the family home in situations where the family may be experiencing conflict. Visits are also sustained over a period of time in that they continue from 18 weeks of pregnancy through until two years after the birth of the child.

We recognise and welcome the Federal Government's important decision to adapt the nurse home-visiting approach Nurse Family Partnerships, developed by Professor David Olds of the University of Colorado and his colleagues, for remote Indigenous communities to improve Aboriginal child health and well-being.

If these programs are universally provided and strategically located they can intervene in a timely and non-stigmatising manner. Nurse home visitors can refer young people experiencing family violence to an appropriate service at a time when they may be more likely to engage with support programs.

Recommendations:

8. That the Inquiry recommends that universal services are skilled up in referral of young parents to youth-specific family violence programs such as LOVE BiTES.
9. That the Inquiry recommends that the Nurse Family Partnerships program is implemented in disadvantaged communities across Australia.

5.4 Accessible Behaviour Change Programs

Both victims and perpetrators of violence need access to support programs. These programs should be specifically tailored for young people in order to focus on the specific needs that children and young people have.

Women have more women to talk to and men don't have people to talk to. Having someone to talk to can help
-Focus group participant

Our consultations with service users and staff identified a key gap in behaviour change programs for perpetrators of bullying or violent behaviour. If perpetrators receive minimal or no intervention in family and domestic violence, options for change and survivors' safety are compromised. This 'invisibility' in some current child protection responses to domestic violence (Irwin, Wilkinson & Waugh 2002) and the systemic lack of targeted prevention, early intervention and tertiary services, means that it is less likely that perpetrators will address their behaviour or acknowledge the impact of their behaviour on their partners or family members.

Staff at UCCYPF report that tertiary intervention services that there are insufficient services for perpetrators of domestic and family violence within NSW. In some regions, there are no services to which perpetrators may be referred by NSW Police or other services.

We need that holistic approach. We are fixing up one side of the fence, but the other side of the fence just keeps falling down.

-Burnside staff member

In consultation many of our service users expressed the need for someone to talk to or a place to go to in order to learn about non-violent behaviour. This identifies a gap in service provision that the community has expressed a need to address.

Recommendation:

10. That the Inquiry recommends that the government increase the number of tertiary intervention services that target the perpetrators of violent behaviour.

11. That the Inquiry recommends that the government support the implementation of a non-stigmatising program that teaches constructive strategies to children and young people for dealing with their anger.

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