Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to comment upon the impact of violence on young Australians.

Victim Support Australasia Inc (VSA) is the national voluntary, not for profit association of victim services in Australia and New Zealand (Attachment A). Our member services are available to any person who has been a victim of crime. Across the services, victims of crime who are young people form a substantial proportion of the case load. While VSA is not in a position to comment on some aspects of the Committee's Terms of Reference, our interest is to draw your attention to the widespread victimisation of young people, the impact upon them, and the paucity and patchy nature of supports available to them.

Response to Terms of Reference

We refer the committee to a presentation by Jennifer Duncan from the Youth Affairs Council of South Australia to the National Victims of Crime Conference in Adelaide in September 2008 (see www.victimsa.org) With her permission, we quote substantively from this paper which succinctly addresses many of the issues from a victim perspective.

Young People as Victims of Crime

Ms Duncan said,
"It is clear from statistics that young people are disproportionately represented amongst victims of crime, particularly crimes against the person. What research that does exist around this in Australia is somewhat dated (to the 1999 Australian Institute of Criminology's Children and Crime: Victims and Offenders Conference). The most comprehensive Australian research on the topic of young people as victims of crime, specifically violence, dates back to a 1992 report by the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme.

Clearly, there is an urgent need to update our research into this area, however according to the South Australian Office of Crime Statistics and Research, in 2006 children and young people constituted:

- Over 45% of victims of murder, attempted murder or conspiracy to murder
- Over 18% of victims of manslaughter and driving causing death
- Over 37% of victims of assault causing bodily harm
- Over 40% of victims of other forms of assault
- Over 54% of victims of kidnapping or abduction
- Over 30% of victims of stalking, and
- Over 27% of victims of other forms of crime against the person

For the same period, children and young people aged 0 to 24 constituted 32% of South Australia's population."

Presumably figures for other States would not be all that different from SA thus it is legitimate for us to suggest this generalisation in identifying the extent of the issue and potential strategies.

While much attention has rightly been made of the experience of child abuse as a source of criminal victimisation, a rudimentary grasp of available crime statistics reveal a much more extensive experience of a wide range of crimes. Young girls and women are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse, assault and harassment. Young boys and men constitute the largest group victimised by violent assault.

Repeat Victimisation

Again from Ms Duncan, "Repeat victimisation studies suggest that certain individuals are at elevated risk of ongoing or repeat victimisation. In many instances, these individuals are drawn from a pre-existing group of the vulnerable and disadvantaged, with their victimisation constituting both a consequence, and compounding (factor), of that prior disadvantage.

Young people who might fall into this category are young people in the care system and young people living in areas of high crime which, the work of Dr Tony Vinson tells us in *Dropping Off the Edge*, are also areas of high socio-economic disadvantage and low social cohesion.

Educating young people about how to protect themselves from becoming a victim and intervening soon after victimisation are critical to preventing repeat victimisation.

Barriers to Reporting Crime amongst Young People

Duncan's involvement with young people leads her to conclude, "Whilst young people are highly represented amongst the victims of crime they are often reluctant to report crimes to police" and believes that this can relate to a range of issues:

- Young people may be silenced by a culture of not 'dobbing' or 'dogging'.
- Young people may have little faith in the likelihood of action being taken.
- Many young people will be willing to take action themselves (including retribution).
- The significant risk of this, is that through taking matters into their own hands young people heighten the risk of their own re-victimisation.

- Many young people have experience of the justice system and don't like what they've seen. Particularly for those most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people, there is a likelihood that they may wish to avoid the justice system because:
  - they've seen what it can do and, despite being the victim, don't want to bring those consequences to the person who has offended against them.
  - if there are family members with a record in the system, they may not wish to reinvite the justice system back into their lives for their own or someone else's reasons.
  - in some cases, their past experience of the justice system has proven ...that it is ill-equipped to help improve their lives.
- Some young people may fear consequences to themselves –especially if they have offended.

In addition, the fact that young people are highly likely to be victimised by people they know – family members, school 'friends', acquaintances and others means that many young people experience a conflict of loyalties. For those young people victimised by peers the additional pressure not to tell may be compounded by a very real fear of retribution and exclusion.

The Impact of Violence on Young People

Violent crime is shocking no matter what the age or gender of the victim. However, for young people violent victimisation shatters their sense of security and their faith in a just world. Many become isolated and fearful especially if the violence is on-going for example in the school setting. Children can sometimes blame themselves for what has happened. Their alienation from figures in authority can be compounded by the over-riding emphasis on young people as troublemakers and offenders.

In addition to the physical, emotional and social impacts of violence on young people victim services across Australasia consistently see the negative effects on young people's education and social engagement. It is not uncommon for young people to drop grades or even to drop out of school following victimisation. The lack of a strong, concerted and sustained focus on helping the young person stabilise and helping them regain their confidence while at the same time maintaining their education is deeply damaging to the young person's future.

Service Responses to Violence against Young People

Schools in particular tend to have policies and programs aimed at delinquency prevention and managing disruptive behaviour. However, aside from mandatory policies in relation to reporting child abuse, there is little if any attention given to comprehensive support and assistance for young people victimised by violence. This is in spite of some estimates suggesting that 47% of violence against young people is experienced at school (see http://www.victimsupportsco.demon.co.uk/leaflets/young.html)

Victim support services across Australasia do market their services to children and young people with varying degrees of success. Some youth services and youth law services also acknowledge that young people can be victims and offer information and advice. However, some problems include:

- there is little 'cross-over' collaboration between victim services and youth services

- models of service do not effectively address the reality of daily life for most young people (e.g. most are open during the day when young people are in school)

- little or ineffective use is made of new technologies in order to reach young people

- school programs about crime and violence emphasise the role of young people as offenders and tend not to discuss the experience of young people as victims of violence

- child protection policies dominate frameworks to address violence and young people but fail utterly to address peer violence or violence from those outside the family

- many models of service attempt to balance the privacy of the young person alongside the evidence that suggests that the involvement of family and close peers in recovery are strong predictors of resilience

- specialisation of responses to particular forms of violence – for example, sexual assault or bullying – are developed in isolation and service silos with little or no attempts to synthesise research or evaluation knowledge to a 'generalisable' degree

- specialisation of focus on particular groups of young people – for example, young girls or Indigenous youth – has the effect that the needs of youth as a whole are unaddressed

- the lack of research and evaluation by any sector across Australia into the incidence and impact (in the short and longer term) of violence and crime on young people means that interventions are ill-informed and often lacking in sustainability

The Links between Violence, Victimisation and Offending

Duncan summarises as follows, "When looking at the issue of young people as victims, it is important to note that many of the risk factors that can relate to children and young people becoming victims of crime, mirror the risk factors associated with youth offending." Hence the importance of recognising the victim-offender cycle.

It must be stressed that not every child or young person who is a victim of violence will necessarily become an offender. However, Duncan's contention is "that overcoming the barriers for young people to report crime and, thereby, having the offending addressed, will also assist young people to access the necessary supports to build their resilience against repeat offending and consequently reduce:

a) young people's prominence amongst victims of crime, and

b) any consequent offending by young people that may stem from offending against them." VSA agrees entirely with this proposition.

Research (*Punishment and behaviour change*: an Australian Psychological Society position paper. Australian Psychologist Vol 31, No. 3, P 160) shows that aggression, anti-social and criminal behaviour are remarkably stable from early childhood into adulthood and generally caused by:

- biological factors;
- upbringing;
- sex-role socialisation,
- peer relationships;
- cultural influences;
- social factors such as economic inequality, and
- media influence.

As a society we have an enormous challenge to change the predisposition to violence and anti-social behaviour that many children carry forward into adulthood, and to prevent potential adult offenders from developing these traits later in life.

Victims of social exclusion, unemployment, cultural isolation, homelessness, poverty and family breakdown impact upon the health, welfare and justice system – but this connection is rarely made overt. Similarly, the links between such victimisation and offending are rarely enunciated clearly.

We strongly believe that a community response to criminal victimisation is part of the equation. Victims should be given appropriate support and rehabilitation to prevent their experiences from contributing to the re-offending cycle:

- victims whose homes have been broken into once, become four times more likely to be broken into again – unless they are given advice and assistance in making their homes more secure (targeting hardening reduces opportunity for re-offending)

- victims whose fear of crime after an event is not reduced (eg through counselling) may continue to suffer from poor self-esteem and lack of confidence and therefore present with vulnerability and as likely targets for repeat victimisation

- victims who are treated poorly by the criminal justice system will not report crime again, present good evidence to facilitate offenders taking responsibility for their actions, or contribute to offenders rehabilitation (for example only 15% of rape and sexual assault victims report to police, around 50% of crime generally is not reported)

- victims of child sexual abuse often can become perpetrators if left without therapy and support

Professor Fran Baum from Flinders University outlined how health, social inclusion and crime are further related - and in many ways:

- the benefits of education providing opportunity for (youth) employment and recreational activities – which reduce crime.

- meaningful activities giving a sense of purpose and self-esteem to those who may not be fully employed (particularly the young)

- problems caused by increasing casualisation of the workforce which is particularly relevant to the youth in our state and even more particularly so in country areas

- equalisation (or lack) of income distribution creating the haves and have nots which provide a backdrop for crime by one group against the other

- the presence or absence of pleasant, green and safe environments for meeting and recreating influences well being and opportunity for crime

- cultures and communities in which people treat others decently, with the respect and a sense of cooperation and collective responsibility are healthier and safer

- reduction of alienation of individuals, groups (e.g. youth or unemployed) through community development and capacity building is likely to reduce crime

- decision making is needed which is for public good not private gain and subject to the influence of the "big end of town" for advancement of the well off at the expense of the less affluent – victims of social exclusion often become victims or perpetrators of crime

- mental ill-health is a characteristic of a large number of offenders' background - often caused by the situations described earlier. These are particularly prevalent in our youth who face boredom, lack of self-esteem/identity, poor job and recreational skills, role models of family and sporting heroes who show aggression/violence to solve problems, and family breakdown. Mental health and high youth suicide rates cannot be ignored or treated in isolation to offending.

Strategies to Reduce Violence and its Impact on Young Australians

VSA member services witness on a daily basis the personal impact and cost of a society and its governments that continually promote and rely on the notion that economic wealth or progress, will be the salvation to all society's ills. We challenge this belief – developed, economy-driven societies create the "haves" and "have-nots" which are so much a characteristic of high crime societies. Much more needs to be done through social inclusion strategies to reduce the opportunity and "need" to commit crime.

Punishment is important to show that the community will not tolerate certain behaviour – but it will not reduce crime. There appears a trend of State and Territory governmental support for addressing crime through a simplistic model of harsher punishment regimes and being tough on criminals. We know from the psychological research quoted earlier, that punishment on its own does not act as a deterrent nor does it change or teach alternative behaviour – especially in traditional criminal justice and correctional settings which cannot apply sanctions with the necessary:

- consistency;

- timeliness;
- specificity, and
- shaming of the behaviour (rather than the person).

The community needs strategies to address:

- family dynamics;

- parenting;

- school approaches to bullying and childhood violence;

- what the entertainment multimedia inaccurately portrays as a representation of "normal" society;

- the behaviour of role models in sport, music and community leadership;

- appropriate health and justice system responses to those who are dependent on alcohol, drugs, or similar, and

- a justice system approach to sanctions for unacceptable behaviour which is serious and consistently applied.

Offenders' awareness of the effects and impact of crime on victims, their family, friends and neighbours is very poorly recognised – we believe that once the impact on others is realised, this can have a positive effect on reducing offending behaviour. Victim impact awareness needs to be vastly improved and used as a behavioural intervention with young offenders.

Irvin Waller an international victim and crime prevention expert and key note speaker at the Adelaide conference reported then and referred to his book "*Less Law, More Order*", that longitudinal studies show that youth offend more persistently if they:

- are born into a family in relative poverty and inadequate housing;

- are brought up with inconsistent and uncaring parenting;

- witness intra-familial violence;

- have limited social and cognitive abilities;

- present behavioural problems in primary school;

- are excluded from, or dropping-out of, school;

- are frequently unemployed and with relatively limited income;

- live with a culture of violence on television and in the community.

Concluding Remarks

In summary, it is these societal issues and the criminal justice system aspects raised herein, which VSA believes need to be addressed. The research is clear about the causes of youth offending and there is evidence about what works to reduce young offending from all over the world. It is time to use these global lessons and invest in

preventative and holistic strategies addressing the underlying nature of society and its citizens, if crime is to be reduced.

At the same time, Australia has failed to acknowledge the vulnerability of children and young people to violent crime. Other than the statutory child protection focus on inter-familial abuse, there has been little government support by way of research, services or media comment. This silence is deafening to young victims of violence. It is time to ask the right questions, to listen without preconditions, and to enter a real and purposeful dialogue with young people in our search to respond effectively to them as victims of violence. If we do not take the time to listen and to learn from young victims of violence what do they then understand about our values and our priorities? Much of the future well-being of individuals, families and communities depends upon how well and effectively we respond to the hurt and harm that young victims of violence experience.

ATTACHMENT A

VICTIM SUPPORT AUSTRALIASIA INC

Victim Support Australasia Inc (VSA) is a voluntary, not for profit association of victim services in Australia and New Zealand.

The objectives of Victim Support Australasia include:-

1. Encourage and assist development of consistent, high quality, equitable and accessible support services for people victimised by crime throughout Australasia;

2. Promote fair and equal recognition of the rights and interests of people victimised by crime;

3. Promote legislative and other reforms throughout the criminal justice system that reflect the rights and interests of people victimised by crime;

4. Promote initiatives by individuals, communities and other agencies to improve responses to people victimised by crime;

5. Consult with and foster cooperation between victim support services throughout Australasia; and

6. Promote education and awareness; undertake, facilitate and encourage debate and research of issues that impact upon people victimised by crime.

In order to achieve the foregoing objectives, Victim Support Australasia will:-

1. Act as the peak body for member crime victim services in Australasia;

2. Encourage and promote consistent and high quality standards in the delivery of services to crime victims throughout Australasia;

3. Make representations on behalf of victim support services to governments regarding legislative policy and services involving victims of crime;

4. Provide opportunities for the exchange of experience, information and resources between victim service organisations in Australasia;

5. Provide information and advice to individuals and groups planning to organise support services for victims of crime throughout Australasia where such services do not exist;

6. Publish and distribute reports, leaflets and other literature relating to the support services required by victims of crime at a local, national and regional level;

7. Promote public information, research and good support practice aimed at increasing the awareness of and advancing the knowledge about the issues and effects of crime on the victim, their families and the community; and

8. Organise conferences on issues relating to victims of crime for members and other interested parties and to liaise with organisations, professions and interest groups whose contribution could be beneficial to victims of crime.