

# The Gender Centre Inc.

Sydney Australia

Submission No. 22

(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  
AUSTRALIA

Dear Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth

**RE: Submission to the Inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians**

The Gender Centre Inc welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians with particular interest in the impact of violence on transgender and gender diverse young people.

**About the Gender Centre Inc**

The Gender Centre Inc is a specialist state-wide organization providing services to the Transgender and Gender diverse communities with our office based in Petersham

The gender centre has been in existence since the 1980's. It was entirely funded by the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCs) through the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), by late 1993 DoCs and the NSW department of Health entered into a joint funding agreement. This meant that the Gender Centre, was now funded to provide services to minimise the effects of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) on the transgender community, as well as provide housing options and education to the wider communities

Today The Gender Centre offers a wide range of services to transgender people, people with gender issues their partners, family members and members of the wider community. The Gender Centre is the only funded service in Australia that provides services specifically to the Transgender community.

## Definitions:

For the purpose of this paper the following definitions apply:

Transgender male: This is a person who was born female and identifies as male, adopting characteristics and roles of their identified gender not their birth gender.

Transgender Female: this is a person who was born male and identifies as female, adopting the characteristics and roles of their identified gender, not their birth gender

## Relationship between bullying and violence on the wellbeing of young Transgender Australians

Transgender youth face many challenges in a society that is unforgiving of any system of gender that is not binary. Violence against transgender people starts early in life, transgender people are often at risk for multiple types and incidences of violence, and these threats last throughout their lives.

Violence and inequities experienced on a day to day basis by many transgender young people occur simply *because they are transgender* in 1993 a social researcher at the University of NSW, Roberta Perkins took over the running of a government funded project on transgenders.

This project the National Transgender HIV/AIDS needs assessment project (referred to as the Perkins report) was the first substantial piece of social research into transgender issues within Australia.

The Perkins report found that the Transgenders that responded had experienced enormously high levels of violence and discrimination purely because they were Transgender. This report clearly showed that discrimination, violence and assault were major issues.

In a report [PRIVATE LIVES Pitts, Smith, Mitchell, Patel] on the health and wellbeing of GLBTI Australians (2005) found that

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- 26.5% of transgender males and 33.3% of transgender females modified their daily activities due to fear of discrimination and prejudice
- 66.7% of transgender males and 52.7% of transgender females modified their daily activities in a social setting
- 81.5% of transgender males and 81.8% of transgender females modified their activities in public
- 73.5% of transgender males and 69.7% of transgender females experienced personal insults or verbal abuse
- 29.4% of transgender males and 46.9% of transgender females experienced threats of violence and intimidation because they were transgender

Report on the health and wellbeing of transgender people [Tranznation, Couch Pitts, Mulcare, Croy, Mitchell and Patel 2007] found that out of 253 respondents who completed the survey 229 were from Australia 90.5% and 24.5% were from New Zealand



- 33.6 % suffered threats of violence or intimidation
- 18.6 % suffered physical attacks or other kinds of violence
- 14.6 % had objects thrown at them
- 11.1 % had obscene mail or telephone calls

Transphobic bullying results in emotional and even physical injuries. It is not identical to homophobic bullying; it is the transphobic response of other members of society

Recent research by [Hill and Willoughby] (2005) reviewed the current academic knowledge on the experience of the effects of transphobia in various settings.

Transphobia is now recognised by the police services in the UK as a factor in Hate Crimes and Hate Incidents.

The national True Vision initiative launched in the UK in 2004, to encourage the reporting of Hate Crimes against minority communities, records Transphobia as a separate category of hate crime. In this context, transphobic hate crime is defined as:

*Any incident which is perceived to be transphobic by the victim or any other person.  
([http://www.online.police.uk/english/description\\_hate\\_crime.asp](http://www.online.police.uk/english/description_hate_crime.asp)).*

One useful conceptualisation of prejudice towards trans people, by social psychologists, identifies three elements: 'transphobia', 'genderism' and 'gender bashing'.

Transphobia is defined as follows:

*Transphobia is an emotional disgust toward individuals who do not conform to society's gender expectations... Note that the use of the "-phobia" suffix does not imply that a transphobic person suffers clinical phobic reactions; nor does it imply that the transphobic person is suffering from a disorder.*

*The "phobia" suffix is used to imply an irrational fear or hatred, one that is at least partly perpetuated by cultural ideology. (Hill and Willoughby 2005: 91).*

Most research on the subject of transgender has reported high levels of victimisation including harassment by strangers on the street, verbal abuse, assault with a weapon, and/or sexual assault (Gagne et al. 1996 and Lombardi et al. 2001 cited in Hill and Willoughby 2005), trauma and sexual assault as children and adolescents (Gehring and Knudson 2005, Ryan and Rivers 2003) and this is further supported by the work of Moran and Sharpe 2004, Xavier 2000 and Whittle 2002

## Violence

The first national survey on violence against transgender people conducted in the US, and the largest sample on record, documents the high levels of violence and abuse that transgender people face.

The study found that 48% of respondents had been victims of assault, including sexual assault and rape, and 78% had experienced verbal harassment (Genderpac 1997).

The 2001 GLSEN National Climate Survey: the School related Experiences of our Nations Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth collated data showing that 73.7 % of transgender youth reported being sexually harassed during the previous school year, which was significantly higher than the 57.8 % response rate for male youth.

### Sexual assault among young Transgenders

In a study in Sydney with 146 transgender people [Perkins report] results show that

- 12.3% were the victims of incest
- 19.9% were raped by a family member or relative

Age at which sexual assault on transgenders occurred

- |                        |              |        |
|------------------------|--------------|--------|
| • Under 5 years of age | frequency 8  | 5.5%   |
| • 5-7 years            | frequency 13 | 8.9%   |
| • 8-10 years           | frequency 14 | 9.6%   |
| • 11-13 years          | frequency 26 | 17.8%  |
| • 14-16 years          | frequency 22 | 15.1%  |
| • 17-19 years          | frequency 22 | 15.1 % |
| • 20-25 years          | frequency 22 | 15.1%  |

Other research conducted in the US found that 43% of the participants had been a victim of violence or crime, with 75% of those attributing a motive of either transphobia or homophobia to it (Xavier 2000).

It has also been suggested that young transgender people are particularly vulnerable to victimization and harassment, compared to adults (Ryan and Rivers 2003).

Report on Anti –Transgender Violence [Cummings 2002] the survey conducted through The Gender Centre showed that 58 % of respondents claimed to have been assaulted physically because of the way they looked or dressed, 19 % reported that this had occurred a “few times” and 26 % said “more than six times”.

One of the most recognizable forms of violence against the transgendered is focused violence, that is, violence carried out by people who know that their targets are transgendered.

## **Bullying and school based violence:**

In the [Equalities Review UK] [Whittle, Lewis and Al-Alami] Press for Change quote from their report of more than 873 respondents over a seven year period

- 64 % of young transgender men experienced bullying at school

And

- 44 % of young transgender women

These percentages are not just from their fellow pupils but also from staff including teachers these rates of bullying are higher than rates shown in many studies on young gays and lesbians conducted in the UK (no such study has ever been conducted with in Australia)

In the US, research has found that transgender youth are particularly vulnerable to harassment and abuse in school and community settings (Ryan and Rivers 2003; Haldeman 2000).

One study found that school psychologists have little understanding of transgender issues, as much of the literature in the field of psychology has a tendency to pathologise young people who are non-conforming in their gender (Haldeman 2000).

The 2001 GLSEN National Climate Survey: the School related Experiences of our Nations Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth cited that 36.6% of transgender youth reported feeling unsafe in their schools against 16.6% of female and 3.5% of male youth.

The most significant research which can be readily translated into the Australian experience for transgender youth is the research conducted by the Human Rights Watch. The report Titled Hatred in the Hallways: Violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender student in US schools, published in 2001, looked at the significant issue of school violence from not only the student body but also the teachers and other work professionals in an educational setting. The results showed that the issue of violence in schools is highly significant for transgender youth. A general summary of the findings is as follows:

- Young people who identify as transgender or gender diverse are subjected to relentless harassment and live in an overwhelming state of isolation
- Transgender youth are at times marginalized and attacked within the gay community, for example, transgender young people are reporting that young gay males behave in sexually harassing ways
- Transitioning gender in the schools is difficult as young people are fearful of coming out about their gender identity issues and are as a result reluctant to undertake steps to address these issues, this in turn can place a high level of stress and trauma on a young adolescent struggling with issues of identity appropriate for their normal stage of development
- The theme that Transgender young people are headed for a life of sex work and no career or “normal/ traditional” lifestyle limits the opportunities presented to them. They are not encouraged as readily as other students to aspire and achieve academically and socially
- Teachers and administrators have taken part in harassing students Because if gender identity, examples of harassment by teachers included: negative responses which contained references to their religious beliefs, “outing” of a transgender student to the class, informing students of transgender student undergoing gender reassignment surgery(the surgery had not taken place), the continued use of phrases such a “he/she” or “it”, and also the persistent

use of inaccurate pronouns and suggestions that a transgender person (transitioning to female) should stop acting like a girl and be more like the boy they were born to be.

- Teachers and administrators in numerous cases refuse to act to protect transgender students from the violence and harassment they receive: Sentiments such as “you chose this lifestyle you need to carry all the baggage that comes with it” (233 of the HRW report) were reported as being said by teachers to transgender students as a response to addressing the harassment and violence experienced in the school setting.

### **Translating this data into the Australian Experience: Anecdotal evidence**

Young transgender people are particularly vulnerable to discrimination and harassment [Anti-Transgender Violence Report [Cummings 2002]-The problem of bullying in schools has been a matter for growing concern in recent years.

As already noted there has been little research conducted in Australia on the issue of transgender young people and bullying and violence. However a vast collection of anecdotal information exists in the records kept in client files by the Gender Centre.

Much of the information shared by clients of the Gender Centre reinforces the experiences shared by the participants in the Human Rights Watch.

Clients coming to the Gender report the following similar experiences:

- Transgender young people report that when discussing with teachers their experiences of bullying, the teachers were unsympathetic. The young trans students reported that they felt the teachers were taking the side of the perpetrators of the bullying. They further disclosed that they felt the teachers response was indicative of a person who believed the transgender student had been the instigator of the bullying by the mere fact that they were transgender
- Some transgender students told stories of teachers who referred to them as “it” during school class.
- Transgender students reported in case management meetings that their schooling experiences had been fear driven and they had avoided addressing issues of transition during their school years. They suppressed their identity issues in order to survive their school days
- One young person reported that a school teacher was unsupportive of the transgender students’ academic goals informing them that as a transgender person she would not have the opportunities to pursue her dreams, suggesting that she not bother to try.
- A common theme of the stories shared by clients of the Gender Centre is that School was a time of isolation. Other students avoided or harassed the transgender student. Resulting in the transgender young person self selecting out of school, or if they persevered they hid during recess breaks to avoid negative experiences.
- Another common theme was that transgender people reported that when they did report abuse the teachers were likely to brush off incidents by explaining away the assailant’s behaviour and making excuses for it. A Reason such as ‘the assailant only does this because as a transgender person you are different and the assailant does not understand you,’ was a standard explanation heard by transgender people. The transgender clients reported that this left them feeling like the assault was not a crime as people in authority attempted to excuse the behaviours rather than address them

As noted these points are raised as part of anecdotal evidence shared by clients coming to the Gender Centre for welfare support. Because the data is not of a research standard should not mean

that the content is valueless. These stories are true reflections of the experiences that transgender people had going through the Australian School system.

### **The Impact of this violence on Transgender young people:**

*Transgender individuals can enrage others by their mere existence (Denny).*

This quote encompasses much of some transgender young people's experiences. The impact of such vitriolic language and life experiences has far reaching consequences on a young person.

The abuse, violence, bullying and harassment experienced by transgender young people affects them in the following ways:

- The student and not the harassment is the problem response to transgender violence
- Young transgender people stop participating in class, grades fall and the capacity to complete school work diminishes (HRW, 76, 175, 177)
- Social isolation as trans students sit alone and avoid contact with the rest of the student body
- Young transgender people are reluctant to transition or even address issues relating to their gender dysphoria. This places significant additional stress on the adolescent as they struggle through the normal growth and emotional psychosocial development that occurs within adolescence
- The dismissive manner in which institutions such as schools manage a trans students bullying and harassment experiences creates a feeling of powerlessness in the trans young person. They feel powerless to change their circumstances. This powerlessness can leave a young trans student feeling like to only escape route they have is to exit school
- Transgender students who experience verbal harassment regularly are left feeling worthless. This message is reinforced by the schools reluctance to address the issues and protect the transgender student (HRW 82)
- Verbal Harassment causes hurt as much as physical violence (Mallon 98, p85)
  
- It goes almost without saying that experiencing sexual harassment has mental health consequences for youth. Many students who are subjected to sexual harassment report symptoms of depression that may include loss of appetite, loss of interest in their usual activities, nightmares or disturbed sleep, feelings of isolation from friends and family, and feelings of sadness or anger. They may also have difficulties at school, such as missing school days, not performing as well in school, skipping or dropping classes, or being late to class.(Fineran & Bennett 99, p6)
- The most significant impact on the psychological makeup of the transgender young person is the lesson that Transgender young people are taught as a result of school bullying and the lack of response. Trans young people come to believe that verbal and physical harassment is an inevitable consequence of being transgender and no rights will be afforded to anyone who chooses to live as such. This is already evident from the lack of protection afforded the transgender student in the "safe" confines of an educational setting (HRW 93)

- For young transgender people the reinforced ideas that they have limited to no future because of their gender status, (a value repeatedly reported to be reinforced by teachers and other school staff as previously discussed) sees them aspire to underachieve or drop out of school. With poor education and limited marketable job skills transgender young people are especially at risk of being drawn into the subculture of easy cash as avenues of employment are closed to them. This subculture of easy cash is that of drug trade, sex work and other crime. Once in this subculture it is difficult for the young transgender person to escape. Already excluded from employment because of discrimination and poor education they now can be further excluded from employment because of criminal records and histories which show a transient and unstable lifestyle. These are not characteristics that employers openly seek.
- For young transgender people the constant barrage of abuse and bullying in their lives can lead them to undertake drug use in an attempt to manage the distress and depressive emotions. At one level This self medicating behaviour is one which can be the entry point for young Transgenders to follow the pathway into an easy cash lifestyle as described above, at another level this behaviour leads the young trans person down the pathway of a drug addicted life.

### **The Vulnerability of Young Transgender People**

Barriers to Reporting Crime amongst Young People: There are a number of barriers for transgender people to report incidents of violence and harassment. The most common reasons however for the lack of reporting in regard to this issue are:

- Shame ( Denny)
- Fear of police
- Fear of institutions, if the abuse has occurred in an institutional setting, such as the school environment then the young person is more likely to be distrustful of another institution such as the police force and not wish to approach them
- A lack of understanding about the nature of bullying. As already noted many young transgender people are encouraged to negate and/or ignore their experiences of violence as perceive these events as one for which they are themselves responsible. In such cases young transgender people are reluctant to acknowledge a crime has been committed and as such will not think to report any experiences to the police or another authority
- Fear of disbelief is also a strong reason for young Transgender people to not report. Transgender people may not report violence or harassment as they fear that they will not be believed when they share their story with a police officer.
- Fear of blame: Again as already discussed Teachers and administrators in schools have been found to have said to young transgender people that the violence and abuse is a result of the trans person's own actions. Their rights as a victim of a crime a quickly negated and they are held accountable for the actions of the perpetrator of the crime. Young people having experienced this are not likely to attempt to get assistance from another adult in a position of authority such as police officer as they



are fearful that the assignation of being the instigator of the violence is reinforced by the police

- Young people also do not report because they believe that doing so will not make a difference to their situation, or they fear it will make the situation worse. They may consider the police to be ineffective in managing the situation as experience has already shown them that school has been ineffective. They may also fear retribution and an escalation of violence, abuse and harassment should they report any incident to the police.
- When young people do report violence to the police or teachers it is often registered as homophobia or violence against a gay or lesbian person. This results in inappropriate responses to the violence. The needs for transgender people are not the same as the needs of gay or lesbian people. This is because gender dysphoria is not the same as homosexuality. So when transgender people do report violence it is recorded inaccurately and also they feel unsupported because of the failure of the person taking the report to recognise the nature of the violence
- Young people who come out to the families may not be accepted and subjected to family violence because of the gender diversity; This places them in a situation where they can remain at home subjected to violence or run away. For the young people that do leave the family home (or in many cases are told to “get out”. This situation places them in an unsupported cycle of homelessness as there are few services able to effectively support a young transgender person as they transition. Sleeping rough is an option fraught with more opportunities for a trans young person to be subjected to violence also as they become enmeshed in a transient lifestyle

### *Social and economic factors that contribute to violence by young Australians*

As already noted, a transgender person can inspire violence just by their very existence in the community. This is of course due to a lack of knowledge and perpetuation of the myths in popular culture about transgender people. This ignorance of transgender issues is a universal condition and as such it is difficult to determine that the socio economic status of a transgender person has an impact on their safety. Transgender young people from all socio economic backgrounds have reported incidents of violence anecdotally to staff at the gender centre. The perpetrators of the violence have also come from a cross section of socio economic backgrounds. As such it is again difficult to determine if socio economic factors do impact on the likelihood of someone to exhibit violent or harassing behaviours towards transgender young people.

### **Strategies to reduce violence and its impact among young Australians.**

Undifferentiated bullying has been dealt with by new policies in schools but targeted or focused bullying remains a problem. The report “Skool’s out!” created for the Skool’s Out Forum on Homophobic Bullying and Harassment in and around Schools and sponsored by the Crime Prevention Division of the NSW Attorney General’s Department and the Anti-Discrimination Board was launched late in 2002 and deals with the problems of homophobia in and around schools.

Surprisingly it says nothing about transphobia. Since there is an overlap, usually created by perpetrators mistaking transgendered students for gays or lesbians, it would have seemed appropriate to create a sub-section for the transgendered, or at least mention the similarities and differences between them.

Much of the report is subjective and anecdotal and the section on Referral and Support Organizations fails to mention transgender support organizations such as The Gender Centre and sources of information.

In another study, [Jeltova and Fish] (2004) highlight the need for systemic change in schools with the establishment of anti-harassment and LGBT-friendly environments in schools.

Research needs to be done into the experience of trans identified or masculine female adolescents, and their need for protection from bullying at school .

There is a need for projection to ensure trans identified young people are helped to stay on at school, rather than leave and seek education later

## **Summary**

In summarising the issue of the perceptions of violence and community safety among young Australians, young transgender people are at significant risk of experiencing violence. According to the American Psychological Association transgender and gender variant people are at risk of harassment, physical and sexual violence in institutional settings, young trans people are particularly at risk in school environments, homeless services and residential settings.(APA 2008 August). This means for young people they are likely to be subjected to violence in environments thought to be agencies of support and safety for young people and from the data discussed it is apparent the responses to date by teachers and other professionals has exacerbated the problem with some of these professionals also being perpetrators of the violence and vilification towards transgender youth.

Education and better support systems for responding to violence need to be developed that meet the specific needs of transgender youth, rather than the assumption that a transgender young person's needs can be met under a generic plan or a program tailored to the gay/lesbian and bisexual community.

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