

Understanding Youth Violence

- 3.1 Chapter 3 presents an overview of risk and protective factors that occur at individual, family, community or societal levels and that influence the risks of experiencing youth violence. The Chapter also examines the association of alcohol and other drugs with violence. The Chapter concludes by considering specific populations of young people that are at increased risk of experiencing violence.

Risk and Protective Factors Associated with Youth Violence

- 3.2 Understanding the key causes of violence will assist in developing and improving strategies to reduce future violence among young Australians. A significant body of research, both international and national, already exists. This research indicates that violent behaviour among young people is influenced by multiple factors.¹ These factors act either to increase the likelihood of young people engaging in violent and/or anti-social behaviour (i.e. risk factors) or decrease the likelihood of young people engaging in these behaviours (i.e. protective factors).
- 3.3 While not a comprehensive review of all that is known about the risk and protective factors and their influences on the behaviour of young people, this Chapter provides context for subsequent considerations of interventions to reduce levels of youth violence in Australia and its impact on young Australians.

1 See for example: World Health Organization (WHO) (2002), *World Report on Violence and Health*, Geneva; Williams J, Toumbourou J, Williamson E, Hemphill S & Patton G (2009), *Violent and antisocial behaviours among young adolescents in Australian communities: an analysis of risk and protective factor*, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY).

- 3.4 Research has shown that different risk and protective factors that are associated with youth violence occur at various levels within a young person's environment. The WHO *World Report on Violence and Health* identifies significant influences which it categorises as follows:
- individual factors – includes biological factors (e.g. gender, age), as well as individual psychological and behavioural characteristics (e.g. hyperactivity, impulsiveness, poor behaviour control, attention problems);
 - relationship factors – includes factors associated with the quality of interpersonal relationships, particularly with family members and with peers;
 - community factors – includes levels of attachment to neighbourhood and the degree of social integration within a community; and
 - societal factors – includes factors associated with social and economic disadvantage, and the influence of modern culture which reflects the values and norms of society.²
- 3.5 A number of submissions to the inquiry have referred specifically to the findings of a 2009 report commissioned by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY).³ The ARACY report examined risk and protective factors for violent and anti-social behaviour in Australian adolescents aged 10-14 years. In this report risk and protective factors were broadly categorised and examined in the context of the following four domains:
- peer-individual;
 - family;
 - school; and
 - community.
- 3.6 Additional observations were also made of the prevalence of alcohol use and associations with violent and anti-social behaviour among young people. Analysis of the research data led the authors to make the following observations:

2 WHO (2002), *World Report on Violence and Health*, Geneva, pp 32-38.

3 Williams J, Toumbourou J, Williamson E, Hemphill S & Patton G (2009), *Violent and antisocial behaviours among young adolescents in Australian communities: an analysis of risk and protective factors*, ARACY. See for example: ARACY, Submission No 55, p 28; NSW Government, Submission No 76, pp 1-2.

- girls are significantly less likely than boys to participate in violent or anti-social behaviour, with boys five times more likely to participate in violent behaviour;
- the greater the number of risk factors in the young person's life, the more likely they are to engage in problem behaviours;
- the greater the number of protective factors in the young person's life, the less likely they are to engage in problem behaviours;
- risk and protective factors have different levels of influence depending on the young person's developmental stage at the time of exposure, and the total number of risk and protective factors they experience;
- almost 80% of young people who had four or more risk factors reported having used alcohol in the past month and/or having been involved in violent or anti-social behaviour in the past year. This percentage dropped to just over 50% for those with two or three risk factors and 23% for those with no risk factors or only one risk factor; and
- there is significant variation in the prevalence of violent behaviour across communities even after controlling for socio-economic status, age, sex, alcohol use and individual levels of risk and protection.⁴

3.7 The following section examines characteristics within each of the risk/protective factor domains more closely.

Individual Factors

3.8 Research has identified a number of factors specific to the individual that have implications for the extent to which a young person is more or less, likely to engage constructively with society, or to engage in violent and anti-social behaviour. These factors include:

- gender – young males more likely to engage in anti-social and violent behaviour than young females;
- age – violent behaviour peaks at around 15-19 years of age and declines thereafter;
- temperament – characteristics such as hyperactivity, impulsiveness, poor behaviour control and attention problems are associated with increased risk of anti-social and violent behaviour;

4 Williams, J, Toumbourou, J, Williamson, E, Hemphill, S & Patton, G (2009) *Violent and antisocial behaviours among young adolescents in Australian communities: an analysis of risk and protective factors*, ARACY.

- intellectual capacity – low intelligence is a risk factor for anti-social and violent behaviour;
- brain development – major changes to adolescent brain development are known to affect how young people regulate emotion, their response to stress, propensity for risk taking behaviour, as well as how their brain processes alcohol and drugs;
- diet and nutrition – malnutrition and nutritional deficiencies, particularly lack of protein, certain vitamin and mineral deficiencies, have been shown to contribute to poorer behavioural and mental outcomes for young people.⁵

3.9 Research has also pointed to possible pre-birth influences (e.g. the effect of alcohol and drug use during pregnancy, including foetal alcohol syndrome) which may be associated with increased likelihood of behavioural difficulties, thereby predisposing some young people to anti-social and/or violent behaviour.⁶

3.10 While recognising that some individual factors such as age and gender cannot be changed, ARACY has called for the interaction of individual factors with other social, economic and environmental influences to be acknowledged when considering strategies that seek to ameliorate youth violence.⁷

Relationship Factors

3.11 Factors associated with interpersonal relationships, particularly relationships with family and peers can strongly contribute to the risks of developing aggressive or violent behaviour.

Family Factors

3.12 Key risk factors at family level associated with the development of violent and anti-social behaviour include:

- poor family management such as poor monitoring and supervision of children, the use of inconsistent and/or unusually harsh or severe punishment;

5 ARACY, Submission No 55, p 27. See also: The Smith Family, Submission No 14, p 2; The Hon Dr Bob Such MP, Submission No 15, p 4; Centre for Adolescent Health, Submission No 24, p 2.

6 ARACY, Submission No 55, p 23.

7 ARACY, Submission No 55, pp 26-27.

- high levels of family conflict and family history of anti-social behaviour, crime, violence or alcohol or drug abuse or dependency; and
 - parental attitudes tolerant to drug use and/or to anti-social behaviour.
- 3.13 Protective family factors include:
- nurturing, supportive and stable family attachments; and
 - opportunities for, and recognition of, pro-social participation of young people in family activities.
- 3.14 In relation to family risk factors specifically, a large volume of evidence to the inquiry has identified risks associated with exposure, either as a witness and/or as a victim, to family conflict and violence.⁸ As explained by Dr Adam Tomison from the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC):
- Often, young people will first be exposed to violence in the home through child abuse and neglect, or through exposure to or the witnessing of domestic violence. There is now a very strong link, which has been evident for some time, that those experiences – being harmed by parents or care-givers – do have a detrimental long-term effect on children’s psychological wellbeing and physical health, and can lead to a pattern of re-victimisation or subsequent perpetration of violence as children age.⁹
- 3.15 In relation to family violence a number of submissions have emphasised the cyclic nature of violence, with victimisation frequently proceeding subsequent offending¹⁰, and with learned behaviour patterns leading to the intergenerational transmission of violent behaviour.¹¹ As explained by the AIC:
- Social learning theory suggests that when children and young people are exposed to violence it may become a learned behaviour, with children learning to model or adopt the violent behaviours

8 See for example: National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc (NCSMC), Submission No 2, pp 3, 7; National Abuse Free Contact Campaign, Submission No 5, p 6; Ms Amanda Beattie, Submission 6, p 3; Youthlaw & Frontyard Youth Services, Submission No 35, p 7.

9 Dr Adam Tomison, Transcript of Evidence, 10 February 2010, pp 2-3.

10 See for example: Victim Support Australasia Inc (VSA), Submission No 1, p 5; Youthlaw & Frontyard Youth Services, Submission No 35, p 6; NSW Government, Submission No 76, p 1.

11 See for example: NCSMC, Submission No 2, pp 3-7; The Smith Family, Submission No 14, pp 2-3; Cairns Community Legal Centre Inc, Submission No 23, p 5; Youthlaw & Frontyard Youth Services, Submission No 35, pp 6-7; UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families (UCCYPF), Submission No 45, p 13.

they see demonstrated by significant others in their lives, particularly parents and caregivers.¹²

- 3.16 Although the focus within the family environment is frequently on the behaviour of parents, some inquiry participants noted that adolescent violence against other family members is an insidious form of family violence which is underreported but has serious implications.¹³ The behaviour often occurs as violence against siblings, usually younger siblings. A submitter to the inquiry stated that:

The impact on siblings is the same as adult family violence from men to women; siblings feel frightened, constantly unsafe, terrorised, ashamed and embarrassed. Many suffer physical injury as a result of the violence. Most feel they can tell no one what is happening and unsafe in their own homes.¹⁴

Peer Factors

- 3.17 As young people move from childhood to adolescence the influence of peers increase while that of the family decreases. Risk factors for violent and anti-social behaviour include associating with peers that engage in violent and/or anti-social behaviour. The Queensland Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian observed that the importance of peer influences should not be underestimated. The Commission noted the following observations made by Professor Paul Mazerolle of Griffith University in relation the impact of peer influence, noting that it can:

- provide values/attitudes that endorse violence;
- provide behavioural models supporting violence;
- amplify opportunities and situations for violence; and
- accentuate levels of machismo-bravado.¹⁵

- 3.18 In relation to the potential importance of peer influence, the UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families (UCCYPF) concluded:

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

12 Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC), Submission No 57, p 6.

13 Ms Jo Howard, Submission No 3, p 2. See also: Mr Harry Hukin, Submission No 72, p 1.

14 Ms Jo Howard, Submission No 3, p 2.

15 Queensland Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian, Submission No 66, p 5. See also: Professor Paul Mazerolle, Transcript of Evidence, 30 March 2010, p 22.

young person to become both the victim and the perpetrator in the same act.¹⁶

- 3.19 The following comments in relation to the influence of peer pressure were made by respondents to the inquiry's online youth violence survey:

Peer pressure, trying to prove masculinity, strength, how tough and cool they are. Female, 18-24 years, capital city

... young males who get bored and have nothing to do, either at home or with their friends, and a lack of supervision by the parents, peer pressure to drink/smoke and a lack of respect for their peers. they want to look 'cool' in front of their friends and usually use violence or public bullying to curry favour and get a cheap laugh. Female, 18-24 years, regional city

Community Factors

- 3.20 The communities in which young people and their families live also exert powerful influences on behaviour. Research has shown that certain communities are more likely to experience violence than others.¹⁷ Key risk factors at community level include:

- low levels of community attachment including low levels of bonding to the neighbourhood and high levels of population transience;
- community disorganisation characterised by high population density, high rates of juvenile and adult crime and the availability/use of alcohol and other drugs; and
- poverty/socio-economic disadvantage including poor engagement with education and high levels of unemployment.

- 3.21 As summarised by UCCYPF:

Statistics indicate that certain communities are more likely to experience violence ... 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 ... 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

16 See for example: UCCYPF, Submission No 45, p 14.

17 UCCYPF, Submission No 45, p 12. See also: Youthlaw & Frontyard Youth Services, Submission No 35, p 8.

hardships which in turn impacts on feelings of powerlessness and exclusion.¹⁸

3.22 Protective factors at community level include:

- opportunities for positive engagement with the community and access within the community to places for young people to meet and socialise; and
- recognition from the community of positive involvement.

3.23 An indicative sign of youth disengagement with the community which was raised in evidence, particularly by young people, relates to feelings of boredom and frustration due to a lack of interesting and affordable recreational activities. At the inquiry's Youth Forum held in Melbourne, one young participant noted the lack of 'after hours' activities for young people, stating:

... there is not much to do after hours. Everything closes at five, like shops and other organisations that you can go to. You are just left with nothing. You are left with frustration and anger.¹⁹

3.24 Shortage of recreational activities for young people living in regional or rural areas in particular was highlighted by another young participant of the Forum who explained:

I went to school in a country town where most of the young people have since been arrested for pub fights and stuff because they do not have a cinema there. ... in that town going to the couple of pubs there is one of the only options that people seem to have. A lot of them have a macho vibe to them so they have to try to appear to be really tough at all times when they go to these places. So when someone does bump into them ... their friends will end up roughing them up. Even if it was an accident and even if the person has apologised, they seem to do it anyway. That is because they seem to be really bored and feel the need to do that to try to get a reputation to make them seem really tough, which is quite a problem in a lot of social groups.²⁰

3.25 Similarly, a young submitter to the inquiry, Ms Madison Strutynski observed:

18 UCCYPF, Submission No 45, p 12. See also: Youthlaw & Frontyard Youth Services, Submission No 35, p 8.

19 Farah, Transcript of Evidence, 15 February 2010, p 5. See also: Nasro, Transcript of Evidence, 15 February 2010, p 11.

20 Keith, Transcript of Evidence, 15 February 2010, p 6.

Tackling the issue of teenage boredom in Rural and Regional Queensland and Australia is a huge issue. The main contender being the lack of activities for young Australians to partake in, thus initiating boredom and therefore resulting in drinking and sometimes drugs which in turn leads to destructive behaviours and increased violence particularly between young men and women in our communities.²¹

- 3.26 A representative of the Youth Minister's Roundtable of Young Territorians also observed the linkages between lack of access to recreational activities and violence, saying:

Another solution [to youth violence] may be more activities and events for young people and greater publicity of those that already exist, to relieve youth boredom and recklessness. Many young people we surveyed indicated that boredom can lead to alcohol and other drug abuse, violence and crime.²²

- 3.27 The following comments on the importance of access to recreational activities were made by respondents to the inquiry's online youth violence survey:

Youths need to be kept interested. The moment they are bored they go and cause havoc because there is nothing else to do. Male, under 18 years, capital city

The area in which I live has no entertainment. Cinemas shut at 9, and there is nothing available. nearest clubs (if you're into that) are in the city. There are no sporting facilities, such as bowling, indoor beach volleyball, netball, basketball for people over school age. people get bored, and so they drink, and become violent. Female, 18-24 years, capital city

21 Ms Madison Strutynski, Submission No 74, p 5.

22 Ms Hannah Woerle, Transcript of Evidence, 17 March 2010, p 3.

Taking up sports which allow for an amount of violence (football - tackling, Martial Arts - Sparring, etc.) are ways for people to release their anger in a reasonable and even productive manner, but need to be taught to keep this off the streets and save it up for their sport. Male, under 18 years, regional city

- 3.28 Importantly, even where recreational activities for young people are available, the costs of accessing them were often considered to be prohibitive.²³
- 3.29 Low levels of achievement and poor engagement with school were also identified as risk factors for violent behaviour, with evidence suggesting that there is a cohort of young people in Australia who are 'falling through the education gaps'.²⁴ For this group in particular, a number of submissions questioned the value of school suspensions and expulsions, suggesting that these policies simply exacerbate disengagement. In this regard UCCYPF observed:

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.²⁵

Societal Factors

- 3.30 At societal level, a number of socio-economic and cultural influences have been identified and raised in evidence which may contribute to an environment which is more conducive to violence.²⁶ These societal factors include:

23 May & Farah, Transcript of Evidence, 15 February 2010, pp 4-5.

24 See for example: The Smith Family, Submission No 14, p 3; Cairns Community Legal Centre Inc, Submission No 23, p 5; Youthlaw & Frontyard Youth Services, Submission No 35, p 8.

25 UCCYPF, Submission No 45, p 14.

26 ARACY, Submission No 55, p 25. See also: VSA, Submission No 1, p 7; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), Submission No 42, p 5; Tasmanian Government, Submission No 56, p 3.

- demographic and social changes such as the ageing population, more children/young people living in sole parent families, rapid population growth, migration and urbanisation;
- poverty/income inequality frequently associated with poor educational attainment and long-term unemployment; and
- cultural influences which reflect and reinforce societal values and norms, including the degree of cultural acceptance of violence (e.g. within sports), attitudes towards vulnerable and minority groups and exposure to media violence.

Committee Comment

- 3.31 The Committee recognises that there is a complex array of influences that impact on a young person's risk of experiencing violence. The Committee also recognises that many of the risk and protective factors occurring at various levels and in diverse social contexts, interact and are ultimately interdependent. It is uncommon for these factors to occur in isolation and in general terms the Committee understands that a young person's risk of experiencing violence increases as the number of risk factors increase and the number of protective factors decrease.
- 3.32 Furthermore, the Committee also acknowledges that various risk and protective factors exist in a wider social context which includes influences of situational factors, such as access to alcohol and other drugs, and societal factors including socio-economic and cultural factors. Given the diverse causes, situations and circumstances that influence youth violence, it is clear that a diverse range of interventions is required. Options for interventions are considered in Chapters 4 and 5.

The Influence of Alcohol and Other Drugs

- 3.33 Attitudes that are tolerant towards the use of alcohol and other drugs, coupled with high prevalence of alcohol and drug use among community, family and peers are risk factors for engagement in anti-social and violent behaviour. As such, the association between the consumption of alcohol or use of other drugs and violent behaviour was also a common theme in

evidence to the inquiry.²⁷ With regard specifically to the association between alcohol and violence, the submission from ARACY notes:

The links between alcohol and violent behaviour have been well established. Data from the Australian Department of Health and Ageing for 2003 indicate that alcohol misuse was implicated in:

- half of all domestic and sexual violence cases;
- 40-70 percent of violent crimes;
- 70-80 percent of night-time assaults; and
- 34 percent of murders.²⁸

3.34 The submission from the ACT Government also notes research strongly linking consumption of alcohol with criminal behaviour and violence, observing:

It has been estimated that nationally, approximately 62% of police time is spent in response to alcohol-related incidents. Alcohol is involved in 73% of assaults, 77% of street offences, and 40% of domestic violence incidents and in approximately 90% of all late-night police call-outs.²⁹

3.35 Importantly however, consumption of alcohol not only increases the risk of perpetrating violence, but also the risks of victimisation. As outlined in the submission from the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS):

Alcohol and drug use affects cognitive and physical functioning. In an intoxicated state of mind, rational decision-making is often compromised, leading to less self-control and an inability to assess risks. In such a state, certain drinkers are more likely to resort to violence in times of conflict or confrontation. On the other hand, intoxication that reduces physical control and the ability to recognise dangerous situations can make some people easy targets for perpetrators. In the ABS (2005) Personal Safety Survey Australia, 79% of the 18-24 year old men who identified as having been physically assaulted said that the perpetrators had been drinking or taking drugs. Just over one-third (34%) also said that they themselves had been drinking or taking drugs.³⁰

27 See for example: NCSMC, Submission No 2, pp 7-8; The Hon Dr Bob Such MP, Submission No 15, p 3; Cairns Community Legal Centre Inc, Submission No 23, p 6; AIHW, Submission No 42, pp 3-4; Mission Australia, Submission No 59, pp 10-12; Dr Adam Tomison, Transcript of Evidence, 10 February 2010, p 9.

28 ARACY, Submission No 55, p 20.

29 ACT Government, Submission No 37, p 6.

30 Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), Submission No 39, p 4.

3.36 As part of the *National Drug Strategy Household Survey* conducted by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) in 2007 respondents were asked if in the last 12 months, anyone affected by alcohol or illicit drugs had verbally abused, physically abused or put the respondent in fear. Results indicated that:

... one in five Australians aged 14 years or older were the victims of alcohol-related incidents. People aged 20–29 years were most likely to be victims of drug-related incidents in the previous 12 months compared to other age groups. Young people aged 14–19 years who were the victims of physical abuse were most likely to receive bruising and abrasions.³¹

3.37 Also from the AIHW's *National Drug Strategy Household Survey* the submission from the Australian Government highlights the following findings:

... in a 12 month period there were an estimated:

- 4.4 million victims of alcohol-related verbal abuse;
- 2.3 million Australians aged 14 years or older who were 'put in fear' by persons under the influence of alcohol in the 12 months preceding the 2007 survey.

Further, more than three quarters of a million Australians were physically abused by persons under the influence of alcohol.³²

3.38 In relation to younger people, specifically those aged 10–14 years, research commissioned by ARACY confirms a strong association between the consumption of alcohol, including binge drinking, and anti-social or violent behaviour as outlined below:

- The likelihood of engaging in violent or antisocial behaviour was much higher for those who had ever used alcohol and particularly high amongst those who had drunk five or more alcoholic drinks on one occasion in the previous two weeks (binge drinkers).
- Young people who had ever consumed alcohol, or had 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

31 AIHW, Submission No 42, pp 3–4.

32 Australian Government – Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) et al, Submission No 62, p 13. See also: AIFS, Submission No 39, p 3.

more than five times higher than for those who had not consumed alcohol at this level, while the likelihood of participating in antisocial behaviour was more than nine times as high.³³

- 3.39 The association between consumption of alcohol by younger people and increased vulnerability to violence was highlighted by the Commissioner for Children and Young People (WA) who noted:

The nexus between alcohol use and vulnerability to violence and other forms of personal violation is of particular concern ... 19% of female and 12% of male secondary school age students reported having unwanted sex because they were 'too drunk'. Alarmingly this trend seems to be increasing, consistent with increases in risky levels of alcohol consumption in young people, particularly young women.³⁴

- 3.40 Another common practice among young people, pre-loading (i.e. consuming a large amount of alcohol prior to going out to licensed premises or other entertainment venues) has also been strongly linked to increased risk of experiencing violence. As noted by the Australian Drug Foundation (ADF):

Those who pre-loaded were two and half times more likely to have been in a fight when going out and pre-loading was more strongly associated with being involved in nightlife violence than the total amount of alcohol an individual consumed.³⁵

- 3.41 While acknowledging the clear associations between alcohol and youth violence, a number of submissions also emphasised that risky and harmful alcohol consumption should not be viewed simply as a youth issue, but as a broader community issue.³⁶ Noting the general acceptance of alcohol as an integral part of Australian society, the Queensland Government observed:

There are clear linkages between alcohol and violence. Alcohol is, however, an integral part of Australia's history, reputation, and image. It has infiltrated pop culture, featuring in books, music videos, movies, anecdotes, jokes, normal conversation and even advertising for non-related products. For many, it is a key

33 ARACY, Submission No 55, pp 20-21.

34 Commissioner for Children and Young People (WA), Submission No 33, p 3.

35 See for example: Australian Drug Foundation (ADF), Submission No 29, p 10.

36 See for example: Commissioner for Children and Young People (WA), Submission No 33, p 3; Youthlaw & Frontyard Youth Services, Submission No 35, pp 2-3, 7; UCCYPF, Submission No 45, pp 8-9; ARACY, Submission No 55, p 23; Ms Linda Chiodo et al, Submission No 78, p 2.

component of their social and cultural life. Furthermore, research for the National Alcohol Campaign found that respondents tended to see harmful use of alcohol as a problem for others and not as an issue for themselves. Drinkers generally perceive that the benefits of alcohol far outweigh the disadvantages. These benefits include the enjoyment experienced through its use, its use as a social lubricant to ease awkwardness of social occasions and its relaxant qualities.³⁷

- 3.42 Furthermore, some inquiry participants emphasised the need to recognise that alcohol and other drugs are not themselves causes of violence, but rather facilitators or catalysts.³⁸ As explained by Ms Jo Howard, a submitter to the inquiry:

The experience of violence both precedes and is a result of illicit drug use and alcohol abuse. Whilst both drugs and alcohol are disinhibitors, they do not cause violence. Violence does not cause drug and alcohol use. But the three issues conflate.³⁹

- 3.43 Similarly, while noting that alcohol consumption does not compel the drinker to behave violently, the ADF observed that violent behaviour is more likely to occur as a result of a combination of risk factors including:

- The pharmacological effects of alcohol
- A person who is willing to be aggressive when drinking
- An immediate drinking context conducive to aggression
- A broader cultural context that is tolerant of alcohol-related aggression.⁴⁰

- 3.44 Expanding on the linkages between drinking and other underlying risk factors, Voices Against Violence observed that:

Alcohol ... in some cases may provide the ignition but the bomb is the underlying lack of respect for others. Alcohol triggers the ignition – lack of personal values or apathy towards others causes the explosion. It is the underlying degradation of common values and respect that emerges and presents itself as acts of violence by some individuals whilst under the influence of drugs and alcohol.⁴¹

37 Queensland Government, Submission No 46, p 2.

38 See for example: Ms Jo Howard, Submission No 3, p 3; Mr Thomas McGuire, Transcript of Evidence, 3 February 2010, p 4;

39 Ms Jo Howard, Submission No 3, p 3.

40 ADF, Submission No 29, p 6.

41 Voices Against Violence, Submission No 67, p 3.

- 3.45 The following comments were made about alcohol and violence by respondents to the inquiry's online youth violence survey:

*I don't think that alcohol is ever the reason for violence, but it only acts as a catalyst. Restricting alcohol use will not help to solve any of the issues at the root of the problem. **Male, 18-24 years, capital city***

*From my limited knowledge (and the way the media portrays it), physical violence seems to happen when people have drunk too much/taken too many drugs and are ejected from night clubs onto the street. They tend to want to pick a fight with anyone. I think these people do need to take more responsibility for their actions when in an intoxicated state. Being drunk doesn't justify being violent so there certainly an issue there which makes some people aggressive and others not. **Female, 18-24 years, capital city***

*Alcohol is becoming a huge problem among adolescents in my area. 16-year-olds are drinking 20 shots of vodka and are ignorant of those encouraging them to cease their constant drinking parties. These teens are doing things that they would never do while sober. Risky and daring things. Alcohol laws are simply not strict enough. **Male, under 18 years, regional city***

- 3.46 In its submission, Step Back Think expressed concern that too much policy focus on alcohol or drugs as 'causes' of violence might actually divert attention from addressing more fundamental issues, stating:

... that in most cases alcohol and illicit drugs act as a facilitator for street violence rather than as the principal cause, which stem from existing social and cultural problems. Alcohol and illicit drugs when compared with cultural change are a convenient policy target and mask the core problems.⁴²

- 3.47 Rather than focusing on the influence of alcohol on young peoples' behaviour, Mr Alex Shaw, a submitter to the inquiry suggested that it would be more useful to consider why young people are increasingly turning to excessive drinking, saying:

Could it be that the violence we see today is not the result of a neat confluence of factors, but rather the result of erosion? Could it be that when you take away self-expression, human decency, self-esteem, everything that is necessary for people in a decent and civil society, then drinking excessively is all that seems available to them? Could drinking be a symptom of many other problems with

42 Step Back Think, Submission No 27, p 5.

young people that we're not even beginning to take seriously enough?⁴³

- 3.48 Although alcohol is the major drug of concern in relation to its association with violent behaviour, some evidence also noted that illicit drugs, often taken in association with alcohol, can also contribute to or exacerbate violent behaviour.⁴⁴ As explained in the submission from the WA Government:

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.⁴⁵

- 3.49 The submission from the WA Government also notes associations between violence and the use of other drugs such as anabolic steroids, heroin and volatile substance abuse.⁴⁶

Committee Comment

- 3.50 While acknowledging the strong associations between alcohol and violence, the Committee also understands that alcohol, taken alone or in combination with other drugs, is not itself a cause of violence. As such, in combination with other risk factors, alcohol may act as a catalyst increasing both the risks of perpetrating violent behaviour and the risks of victimisation. Nevertheless, given the strong associations between alcohol and violent behaviour, and the apparent prevalence of alcohol-fuelled violence, the Committee believes that addressing this issue remains a priority for action.
- 3.51 Evidence to the inquiry suggests that strategies which decrease young peoples' access to alcohol, in combination with social marketing campaigns to effect cultural and attitudinal changes towards alcohol are required. Targeted strategies to decrease the availability and accessibility of alcohol are considered in Chapter 4. Social marketing campaigns to

43 Mr Alex Shaw, Submission No 79, pp 1-2.

44 See for example: NCSMC, Submission No 2, p 7; Australian Government – DEEWR et al, Submission No 62, p 14; Mr Les Twentyman, Transcript of Evidence, 15 February 2010, p 47.

45 WA Government – Department of Premier and Cabinet, Submission No 75, p 3.

46 WA Government – Department of Premier and Cabinet, Submission No 75, p 3.

raise awareness of negative consequences of alcohol abuse and to promote responsible drinking are considered in Chapter 5.

Populations at Increased Risk

- 3.52 The importance of social norms and cultural attitudes which make violent behaviour more acceptable within society was a common theme raised in evidence to the inquiry. As explained by The Hon Dr Bob Such MP:

... the culture or the norms and values of a society can also influence the level of violence by sanctioning violence as a normal means of resolving conflicts.⁴⁷

- 3.53 A large volume of evidence also suggested that negative social and cultural attitudes to vulnerable, marginalised and minority groups also puts particular populations at increased risk of experiencing violence. As summarised by the Nepean Domestic Violence Network:

The risk of being a victim increases when young people are members of marginalized or vulnerable sub cultures within the dominant youth culture. Young people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender are at increased risk. Young people who are homeless and young people who have poor social connection due to violent and abusive backgrounds are at increased risk of becoming involved in violent situations.⁴⁸

- 3.54 The following comment was made by a respondent to the inquiry's online youth violence survey:

Violence is caused by intolerance of peoples' beliefs, way of living, personal preferences, sexual orientation. Female, under 18 years, capital city

Women

- 3.55 As noted in Chapter 2, the violent experiences of young males and females are markedly different. Although young men are more likely to be victims of violent assaults than young women, men are less likely to know their

47 The Hon Dr Bob Such MP, Submission No 15, p 2.

48 Nepean Domestic Violence Network, Submission No 18, pp 2, 4.

assailants. In contrast, women are more likely to know their assailants and to be victims of sexual crime such as rape.⁴⁹

- 3.56 According to evidence, reasons for this include the power imbalance between men and women (gender inequality) and a greater tolerance of aggression and violence towards women.⁵⁰ As stated in the submission from Community Connections:

There are societal norms within Australian culture that encourage a tolerance of violence against women and discourage perpetrators from taking responsibility for their violence. These encompass collective attitudes that favour conservative gender roles, trivialise violence and its effects, blame the victims, deny that violence has occurred and encourage the sexual objectification of women.⁵¹

- 3.57 Similarly, Women's Health Victoria notes:

Violence against women remains a serious and pervasive issue that affects individuals, families, communities and the social fabric of our society as a whole. It is widespread, systematic and culturally entrenched and is recognised as one of the world's most pervasive human rights violations.⁵²

- 3.58 The following comment was made by a respondent to the inquiry's online youth violence survey:

Violence against young women in relationships is absolutely massive, with domestic violence within university boyfriend/girlfriend situations needing more attention. Female, 18-24 years

- 3.59 Issues of gender inequality that contribute to a tolerance of violence against women may be exacerbated by gender stereotyping. These stereotypes are typified by cultural models which equate manhood with dominance and violent behaviour. As explained below:

We need to challenge the construction of masculinity in today's society and move from a construction that accepts control and domination over others to one which privileges caring and

49 Women's Health Victoria, Submission No 17, p 2.

50 See for example: Community Connections (Vic) Ltd, Submission No 12, pp 1-2; The Hon Dr Bob Such MP, Submission No 15, p 2; Royal Women's Hospital, Submission No 21, pp 4-5; VicHealth, Submission No 26, p 2, 8; Mission Australia, Submission No 59, p 25; Ms Linda Chiodo et al, Submission No 78, p 4.

51 Community Connections (Vic) Ltd, Submission No 12, p 4. See also: The Hon Dr Bob Such MP, Submission No 15, p 3.

52 Women's Health Victoria, Submission No 17, p 2.

empathy as desirable traits (and ones that are not considered 'weak').⁵³

- 3.60 Further, with regard to cultural perceptions of masculinity, the acceptance and even glorification of violence in some social settings, particularly in sports, was raised by some.⁵⁴ Mr Michael Jeh of Griffith University suggested that definitions of masculinity need to change if messages about the unacceptability of violent behaviour are going to be effective, stating:

For the next generation of young men coming through, the definition of manhood might be being man enough to walk away, being man enough to look a fight in the eye and say: 'We do not do that. That is what being a real man is about.'⁵⁵

- 3.61 The following comments were made by respondents to the inquiry's online youth violence survey:

*I think a lot of these young guys simply need a way of proving they are men but for the most part don't see any other way of doing it other than how much they can drink, how many girls they can pull or how many fights they are in... **Male, 18-24 years, capital city***

*Men need another gender example of how to live and be than the type of common violent dominant male stereotypes they are presented with in popular culture and through their families. This I see is crucial. **Female, 18-24 years, rural/remote***

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse and Refugee Populations

- 3.62 Evidence to the inquiry indicates that young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, including recent migrants and refugees, have an increased fear of being victims of violence.⁵⁶ Racist abuse was reported to be prevalent in schools. Based on interviews of almost 700 school students the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) reported that 80% of young people from non-Anglo backgrounds and 55% from Anglo backgrounds reported experiences of racism.⁵⁷ The following

53 Ms Jo Howard, Submission No 3, p 4.

54 See for example: Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic), Submission No 60, pp 16-17. See also: National Abuse Free Contact Campaign, Submission No 5, p 3; Women's Health Victoria, Submission No 17, p 3; Mr Michael Jeh, Submission No 73, p 4; Ms Linda Chiodo et al, Submission No 78, p 2.

55 Mr Michael Jeh, Transcript of Evidence, 30 March 2010, p 2.

56 YACVic, Submission No 60, p 12.

57 Foundation for Young Australians (FYA), Submission No 20, p 2.

comment was made by a respondent to the inquiry's online youth violence survey:

Australian born young men are very racist to new refugees. Male, under 18 years, capital city

3.63 With regard specifically to young people from refugee backgrounds, the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) noted the following findings from research conducted by La Trobe University:

According to the research based on the experiences of 88 young people aged 12 to 20 years of age from refugee backgrounds:

- 42% of young people reported experiencing racism because of their ethnicity, religion or colour, by their second year in Australia;
- 9% of young people experienced discrimination in their first year at school in Australia, which increased to 20% at school in the second year;
- 12% of youth experienced discrimination on the street or in public settings;
- 13% of young people experienced discrimination from police since arriving in Australia;
- 21% of young people experienced discrimination in public places since arriving in Australia, especially on trains and in shops.⁵⁸

3.64 The CMY also noted that young people from CALD or refugee backgrounds are likely to feel more insecure for a range of reasons, including past experiences with violence and higher 'visibility' due to ethnic markers such as appearance or language.⁵⁹ The CMY identified increased risk of young people from CALD or refugee backgrounds engaging in retaliatory violence in response to racist aggression, stating:

Retaliatory violence as a response to racist bullying can also have a serious impact on the wellbeing of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, in terms of the consequences for them at school or within the juvenile or criminal justice systems.⁶⁰

Indigenous Australians

3.65 The *State of Australia's Young People* report draws on ABS data which shows that Indigenous young people are more likely to be victims of

58 Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY), Submission No 44, p 6.

59 CMY, Submission No 44, p 3.

60 CMY, Submission No 44, p 7.

violence than non-Indigenous young people, with approximately one third of 18-24 year old Indigenous people reporting that they had been a victim of physical or threatened violence in the previous 12 months.⁶¹

3.66 The Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service (VALS) identifies a number of features specific to violence in Indigenous communities, including:

- Young people being pressured by older people to continue long standing family disputes within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.
- Violence is seen as a consequence of transgenerational trauma from colonisation and erosion of the male role in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander society.
- Some young women present at family violence refuges saying things like: 'my man does not love me if he does not hit me'. People who question this trend attempt to communicate that violence is not a part of Aboriginal culture.
- Over-representation in victimisation statistics, but failure to perceive oneself as a victim, as evidenced by an under-representation in applications to the Victim of Crime Assistance Tribunal by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- Discrimination, bullying or racism on the streets or in schools happening on a daily basis.
- Some young people are not linked in with culture and see prison as a way of learning culture or as a rite of passage.⁶²

3.67 Evidence also noted the comparatively high levels of domestic and family violence in Indigenous communities and emphasised the cyclic nature of violence as a result of past and present abuses.⁶³ Mr Norm Richardson of the Circular Head Aboriginal Corporation observed:

By and large our young people are well educated and well equipped academically but they have been neglected relationally. We need to help them build solid futures through building and maintaining long lasting relationships that bring stability and trust.⁶⁴

61 *State of Australia's Young People: A Report on the social, economic, health and family lives of young people*, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales October 2009, p 115. See also: YACVic, Submission No 60, p 8.

62 Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Ltd (VALS), Submission No 51, pp 1-2.

63 Dr Adam Tomison, Transcript of Evidence, 10 February 2010, p 3. See also: Circular Head Aboriginal Corporation, Submission No 50, p 1.

64 Circular Head Aboriginal Corporation, Submission No 50, p 1.

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex

- 3.68 Submissions from groups representing gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (GLBTI) young people indicate that this group experience higher levels of abuse and violence than the community generally.⁶⁵ Homophobic and sexual preference discrimination, prejudice and violence involving young people was found to occur in all social settings (i.e. at home, at school, and on the streets) leaving no 'safe' environment. The following comment was made by a respondent to the inquiry's online youth violence survey:

Youth violence is increasing for gay and lesbian youth, statistics have shown that schools are still unsafe for a lot of gay and lesbian young people, and research has shown that in general we are turning a blind eye towards violence against these individuals of our community. **Female, 18-24 years, capital city**

- 3.69 As observed below, school was reported as being the most common setting for discrimination, bullying and violence directed against young GLBTI people:

Young people were asked if they had been verbally or physically abused because of their sexuality. Almost half reported being verbally abused (44%) and (16%) physically abused for this reason. Of those who had been abused, school was by far the most common context of abuse with 74% having suffered abuse there (89% of those still of school age). The street (47%) and social occasions (34%) were also common contexts for abuse. Young people were least likely to have suffered heterosexist abuse at sport (12%) and home (18%).⁶⁶

- 3.70 In the school context some concern was expressed that responses by authority figures to sexuality based discrimination, bullying and violence was not consistent. In its submission ACON (formerly known as the AIDS Council of NSW) explained:

Young people talked about teachers ignoring homophobic abuse and not taking it as seriously as they would racist or sexist abuse.

65 See for example: ACON, Submission No 30, pp 4, 6; ALSO Foundation & the Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby (VGLRL), Submission No 53, p 3; Rainbow Network Victoria, Submission No 54, pp 1-2; YACVic, Submission No 60, p 14.

66 ALSO Foundation & the VGLRL, Submission No 53, p 3. See also: OUTthere, Rural Victorian Youth Council for Sexual Diversity, Submission No 16, pp 1-4; FYA, Submission No 20, p 2; Ms Jen Sainsbury, Transcript of Evidence, 15 February 2010, pp 29-30.

There is a perception that some teachers will help, but that it is out of the norm and going beyond the call of duty to do so.⁶⁷

3.71 In Melbourne, Ms Jen Sainsbury of the FYA observed:

We also know that teachers are often reluctant to intervene in incidents of homophobic bullying and abuse. Often they feel undertrained. They might be fearful of backlash from either the school or the parent community. They might be scared of losing their jobs. They might be scared of people thinking that they are encouraging a homosexual lifestyle or of being accused of being gay themselves – which for many people, regardless of their sexual orientation, is a very confronting thing.⁶⁸

3.72 With a history of institutionalised discrimination, addressing abuse and violence directed against GLBTI young people was seen to be particularly challenging as explained in the submission from the ALSO Foundation & the Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby (VGLRL):

Unlike other forms of bullying, there is an institutionalised history of support for sexual and gender related prejudice from the law, medicine and the church. Many of these things have now changed but this is not widely known and many people remain unsure about whether challenging such prejudice is acceptable. In addition, sexual and gender difference is still regarded as a moral issue by many people and therefore seen to be 'trickier' to challenge in a school context than other forms of bullying, for example around body type or ethnicity.⁶⁹

3.73 Although abuse and violence against GLBTI young people involving family members occurs less frequently, its impact was reported to be more significant, as explained by ACON:

What family members say or do is often more hurtful and upsetting. Furthermore, for many same-sex attracted youth, their family and their home is not an environment that they can avoid or escape from due to the fact that young people do not have the economic or social capacity to safely move out of home.⁷⁰

67 ACON, Submission No 30, p 7.

68 Ms Jen Sainsbury, Transcript of Evidence, 15 February 2010, pp 29-30.

69 ALSO Foundation & the VGLRL, Submission No 53, p 5. See also: Ms Jen Sainsbury, Transcript of Evidence, 15 February 2010, p 32.

70 ACON, Submission No 30, p 8.

- 3.74 Also, while noting that rates of drug and alcohol abuse are higher among GLBTI young people than among young people in the wider community, the ALSO Foundation & the VGLRL suggests that rather than being a precursor to violence, in this context substance abuse is more often a form of self-medication to ameliorate impacts of violence and social rejection.⁷¹

Other Vulnerable Populations

- 3.75 Other vulnerable population groups that are at significantly increased risk of experiencing violence include young people who are homeless and young people with disability.
- 3.76 Melbourne based research found that almost all homeless males (96%) and three-quarters of homeless females (74%) had experienced physical violence since leaving home. It was also noted that many of these young people had been rendered homeless in the first place as a consequence of violence occurring in the family home.⁷² The Queensland Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian also noted that the vulnerability of young people who are homeless was probably increased due to a lack of support networks to assist them when they do encounter unsafe situations and decreased options for avoidance.⁷³
- 3.77 According to data from ABS *General Social Survey 2006* young people with disability have considerable concerns about their personal safety, and are in fact more likely to have been victim of violent crime.⁷⁴

Committee Comment

- 3.78 The Committee recognises that young people are not a homogenous group. As a demographically, socially and culturally diverse group their perceptions and experiences of bullying and violence will vary. However, there is no doubt that some groups of young people are more vulnerable to bullying and violence than others. The Committee believes that acknowledging the heterogeneity of young Australians and understanding their different risk profiles will be crucial to developing

71 ALSO Foundation & the VGLRL, Submission No 53, pp 4-5.

72 YACVic, Submission No 60, p 10. See also: Youthlaw & Frontyard Youth Services, Submission No 35, p 5; NSW Government, Submission No 76, p 1.

73 Queensland Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian, Submission No 66, pp 3-4.

74 *State of Australia's Young People: A Report on the social, economic, health and family lives of young people*, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales October 2009, p 116. See also: Cairns Community Legal Centre Inc, Submission No 23, p 4; YACVic, Submission No 60, p 6.

interventions to reduce levels of youth violence and the impact of violence on young people.

- 3.79 The Committee considers that developing and reinforcing social and cultural norms that are founded on respect for diversity will be crucial to achieving a more tolerant and peaceful society. Reinforcement of these values and social norms should start in early education and in schools. Where necessary, targeted educational interventions may also need to be supported by broader social marketing measures to effect wider cultural and attitudinal changes. These interventions and others are considered in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5 of the report.