



Australian Bahá'í Community

Submission No. 58

(Youth Violence)

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A.O.C.

INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE ON YOUNG AUSTRALIANS

Introduction

The Australian Bahá'í Community welcomes the inquiry by the Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth into the impact of violence on young Australians.

Incidents of youth violence have been rising in several Australian States over the past decade.¹ The following observation, written in the international context over a decade ago, sadly seems all too relevant to Australia today:

At this turning point in history, when the forces of disintegration are accelerating and the forces of integration still too little understood, many youth feel caught in a maelstrom, unsure of how and why they should respond with hope when their experiences are so fraught with pain....While many children and youth valiantly struggle not to be victims of their circumstances, too many learn the lessons of apathy and violence².

The Australian Bahá'í Community believes that the essence of any successful strategy to bring about social change is the understanding that humans have a spiritual or moral dimension which shapes their understanding of their life's purpose and their responsibilities towards their family, their community and the world. From this perspective, alongside critical changes in institutional mechanisms, a long-term and preventative solution to end the violence experienced by young Australians – a solution that brings about a fundamental transformation of the values of young people to include respect and empathy for their peers and community - is required. This submission thus addresses two aspects of the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry: social and economic factors that contribute to violence by young Australians; and strategies to reduce violence and its impact among young Australians.

The Australian Bahá'í Community

The Australian Bahá'í Community was established in 1920 and its membership reflects the diversity of modern Australia. As members of the Bahá'í Faith - a worldwide religion, founded over 160 years ago, with more than five million members around the globe - we are dedicated to creating a society based on peace, active cooperation, reciprocity, shared spiritual and moral values, and genuine concern for others. This society would promote human dignity, stimulate

¹ Professor Paul Mazerolle, 'Youth Violence in Australia: Characteristics and Consequences', presented at Griffith University, November 2007.

² Bahá'í Youth: "A New Kind of People" <http://info.bahai.org/article-1-9-2-8.html>

release of human potential, and actively cultivate the inherent nobility that forms the basis of human nature.

Like Bahá'ís across the world, Australian Bahá'ís are engaged in a coherent framework of action that promotes the spiritual development of the individual and channels their collective energies towards service to humanity and the building of unity. We sponsor program that help people of all backgrounds to work together to build a unified, just and peaceful society, in which human talents and capacities are developed and released in service to all. To that end, we offer hundreds of study circles, children's classes, devotional gatherings, and junior youth groups across Australia. These activities connect the hearts of people to sacred writings in order to provide the motivation for social change and action.

Social and economic factors contributing to violence by young Australians

Moral education

It is widely recognised that an inadequate academic or general education and the factors which result from this - such as limited opportunities in the work force - contribute to the increased risk of youth violence. It is less commonly recognised, however, that several other commonly cited risk factors, including a loss of purpose and feelings of hopeless about the future, are a direct result of a more fundamental factor - the lack of a proper moral education. Whilst a general education and material progress are very desirable, the moral, social and psychological development of a child is highly dependent on a more holistic education, which encompasses moral education.

Violence amongst young Australians is a symptom of the failure of our society to cultivate the necessary moral capacity to prevent individuals from behaving in a way that infringes upon the rights and dignity of others. There is, of course, much merit in legal and institutional changes which may address issues such as the immediate safety of young people, as well as their independence and self sufficiency. Of more fundamental importance, however, is the transformation of the individuals whose values sustain involvement in, or acceptance of, violence. (Also see Strategies Section)

Role of the family

The first source of values education is the family. By the time children are old enough to enter school, they have unconsciously adopted many of the values that they experience at home. It is recognised that parental behaviour (particularly neglect or coercion) is a leading cause of violence amongst young people. A recent report by the World Health Organisation has confirmed that the family environment has a great impact on the aggression of young people amongst their peers³.

While acknowledging efforts already taken to provide assistance to families, we believe that giving greater emphasis to supporting families in their function of educating children will help to maximise positive outcomes for youth. With appropriate support, parents can be assisted in their efforts to create a family environment that functions in favour of the child's moral development.

³ "World Report on Violence and Health", Chapter 2, p33, World Health Organisation, 2002

Strategies to reduce violence and its impact among young Australians

It is our view that the essence of any successful strategy to bring about social change is the understanding that humans have a spiritual or moral dimension which shapes their

understanding of their life's purpose and their responsibilities towards their family, their community and the world.

From the Bahá'í Community's perspective, a moral education is imperative not only for the personal development of the individual but also for the benefit of the community as a whole. As stated by the Bahá'í International Community:

Bahá'ís believe that human beings are inherently noble, and that the purpose of life is to cultivate such attributes, skills, virtues and qualities as will enable them to contribute their share to the building of an ever-advancing civilisation. True education releases capacities, develops analytical abilities, confidence, will, and goal-setting competencies, and instils the vision that will enable them to become self-motivating change agents, serving the best interests of the community⁴.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (“UNCRC”), the most comprehensive statement of internationally recognised rights which are to be afforded to all children, emphasises the importance of appropriate moral education.

Article 29 of UNCRC, which was ratified by Australia almost 20 years ago, provides that education must be directed not only to developing a child's personality, talents and physical and mental abilities, but also to developing a child's respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms; and preparing a child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples.

In our view, the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms requires an understanding of the moral principles which underpin such respect. Similarly, preparing a child for life in the community in the spirit of peace, tolerance and friendship requires that they possess essential attributes such as truthfulness, compassion, fair-mindedness, humility and kindness.

UN General Comment No. 1 on Article 29 (1), released in 2001, affirms that a holistic education should “promote a culture which is infused by appropriate human rights values” and should also foster respect for differences and challenge all aspects of discrimination and prejudice.

Article 17 of UNCRC also states the importance of ensuring that children have access to a diverse range of information and material in order to promote their social, spiritual, and moral well-being and physical and mental health. This Article places great importance on spiritual and moral well-being, and recognises that spiritual and moral education extends beyond formal schooling.

⁴ The Teacher's Situation: The Determining Factor of a Quality Education for All, Statement presented to a roundtable discussion at the United Nations World Conference on Education for All by the Year 2000, 8 March 1990, <http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/bic-statements/90-0308.htm>

We propose the principle of the oneness of humanity as a strong basis for any program of moral education. A good understanding of the meaning of the oneness of humanity can support a range of moral beliefs - for example unity, tolerance and kindness – that will curb many of the problems facing our society, including youth violence. In addition, a belief in the oneness of humanity will give way to the realisation that former notions of ‘good’ (for example, when defined in passive terms, to mind one’s own business and not to harm anyone) are simply inadequate in an age of interdependence.

In the light of this principle, a valuable starting point for moral education today lies in a reflection on the commonalities inherent in the great religious and moral systems of the world. This reflection will inevitably reveal that each one espouses unity, cooperation and harmony among people, and supports the development of virtues which are the foundation of trust-based and principled interactions. Every religion has taught that morality begins with the ‘Golden Rule’ - that one should act towards one’s neighbour as one wishes others would act towards oneself.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a widely ratified and accepted statement of the fundamental rights of individuals. As such, it represents the ideals to which individuals and communities must aspire for a non-violent society to take shape. The values contained therein, such as equality and the right to be free from prejudice, should also be included in any curriculum of moral education.

Some of the initiatives taken by the Australian Bahá’í Community in promoting moral education based on these principles are outlined below.

Bahá’í Education in State Schools

The Bahá’í Education in State Schools program (“BESS”) started in Tasmania over 20 years ago and is now taught in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, the Northern Territory, the Australian Capital Territory and Western Australia. The classes are taught in many public primary schools under the “Special Religious Education” or “Scripture” program and are attended by students from all religious backgrounds.

The classes are based on Bahá’í teachings and aim to contribute to the awakening and development of the spiritual nature of children.

In addition Bahá’í education classes attempt to develop within the students the knowledge, skills, understandings and attitudes required to be ‘world citizens’ and to embrace the equality of all people regardless of race, religion, nation, class or gender. Students participating in Bahá’í education classes explore ways in which they may be able to contribute to society and serve humanity.

Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program

A new component of the Australian Bahá’í Community’s efforts to aid the development of young people is a spiritual empowerment program for junior youth (12-15 years of age). The program is designed to assist young people of any background in their individual development, and as a corollary, the advancement of society.

The program seeks to develop the individual as a whole - integrating the spiritual and the material, the theoretical and the practical and the sense of individual progress with service to the community. Raising awareness of world citizenship, for example, is considered a preparation for achieving unity in a world free from religious, racial or gender prejudices. By focusing on higher ideals, such as service to humanity, it is expected that the junior youth will transcend personal concerns to reach out to others as opposed to excessive self-indulgence. Through various community service projects that the junior youth devise themselves, they learn to build a community spirit of service and giving.

Although it would be premature to describe the junior youth program as successful, the initial results make us optimistic about its potential. We hope to build up our resources to make junior youth groups more widely available in Australia.

Conclusion

The time of youth has become less and less associated with innocence and optimism and too often linked with disaffection, hopelessness, and violence.⁵

The Australian Bahá'í Community thanks the Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth for the opportunity to make this submission, outlining our view that the development of the moral and spiritual capabilities of youth is an essential strategy to end the violence experienced by young Australians. We look forward to the outcomes of the Committee's deliberations which we hope will help to bring to an end the scourge of violence afflicting the lives of so many young people.

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⁵ Bahá'í Youth: "A New Kind of People" <http://info.bahai.org/article-1-9-2-8.html>