



Mission Australia

**Mission Australia's response to the House of  
Representatives Standing Committee on Family,  
Community, Housing and Youth**

**Inquiry into the impact of violence on young  
Australians**

**December 2009**

To obtain further information or discuss this submission please contact:

**Anne Hampshire**  
**National Manager, Research and Social Policy**  
Mission Australia

## Mission Australia's response to the inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians

*"I think that it is important to feel safe and to think that you are needed in this world and that there's always something good. It is also vital that you feel safe and comfortable in the environment around you."*

Female, 12 years, Mission Australia's National Survey of Young Australians 2009

*"I'm concerned about personal safety...due to all the random people walking around the streets, when I am walking alone or with just one of my friends and there is a total stranger that seems suspicious I get out my mobile phone for security reasons as I feel that that person could do anything to my friend and I."*

Female, 12 years, Mission Australia's National Survey of Young Australians 2009

### Summary of recommendations

- Mission Australia notes the importance of striking a balance between encouraging good personal safety habits whilst facilitating rather than impeding young people's participation in their communities. While it is critical to reduce the risk of victimisation, it is important that strategies developed in response to perceived and actual levels of violence be considered alongside the need to encourage young people's safe participation in the social, cultural and physical environment. This is a challenge not only for young people themselves, but also their families and the wider community.
- Mission Australia suggests that further consideration be given to strategies that build young people's and their parents' media literacy and critical viewing skills and increase parents' understanding of the impact of media violence as well as enhancing their capacity to make informed viewing choices and counteract the violent messages that their children may be exposed to. This has implications for curricula at all levels of schooling including the early childhood years, as well as media advisory boards and regulatory bodies.
- As alcohol consumption is a significant and known factor in incidences of youth violence, Mission Australia recommends increased investment be made in evidence-based, developmentally appropriate programs, such as the *School Health and Alcohol Harm Reduction Project*, which have a proven impact on alcohol related behaviours.

- Mission Australia strongly recommends that building the capacity of parents and other relatives assume a prominent place in strategies and initiatives to tackle youth violence (particularly strategies aimed at minimising harmful alcohol-related behaviour), since parents and other relatives are influential figures in young people's lives and play an important role in supporting the development of young people's capabilities.
- Peer programs, if well designed, are particularly effective ways of building young people's knowledge and skills, and strengthening young people's support networks. They are also excellent investment value if the educators not only impart information, but build the learner's own peer support capacity. This multiplies the reach and benefits of the program. Mission Australia strongly recommends significant investment in programs that build young people's knowledge of alcohol, drugs and violence, provide them with the tools and strategies to deal appropriately with the issue and seek help and support if required, *and* build the learner's own peer support capacity as part of a broader, comprehensive investment strategy to address youth violence.
- Mission Australia recommends that further investment be made in developing and making available developmentally appropriate rehabilitation services for young people with alcohol and other drug issues who are at increased risk of experiencing violence. Such services should be designed and adequately funded to address the range of interrelated issues that compromise these young people's immediate health and wellbeing, and their medium and longer-term life chances.
- Mission Australia suggests that consideration be given to reviewing the resources available to support schools to develop 'whole school approaches' to bullying, identifying where further support is needed, and developing resources that build schools' capacity to develop and implement strategies to reduce the incidence of bullying. The implementation of such strategies should be accompanied by evaluation plans which provide insight into the level of confidence students have in such strategies.
- Mission Australia suggests that, alongside the implementation of selected 'whole school approaches' to bullying prevention, a community capacity building anti-bullying approach be explored. This would involve the broader community and in particular sporting, recreation and social groups outside the school context, where young people may still be vulnerable to bullying and there is an opportunity to reinforce anti-bullying messages and model pro-social behaviours.

- Mission Australia strongly recommends that investment in early childhood prevention strategies such as *Pathways to Prevention* and other evidence-based strategies that prevent and/or reduce anti-social behaviours be recognised as an integral part of preventing youth violence. The development of strategies to tackle youth violence should explicitly recognise this and design tiered levels of intervention. Early intervention, developmental prevention programs should be viewed as a potentially critical platform that underpins more targeted initiatives that can be provided as and where required. This approach would be particularly valuable in communities experiencing high levels of disadvantage and youth violence.
  
- Mission Australia suggests that investment in employment initiatives and education programs for *parents* be seen as an important component in preventing youth violence. As well as providing parenting support, early intervention developmental programs should ideally also be able to connect families to labour market and education and training programs that facilitate their inclusion in the economic life of the community. This is especially important for families living in areas experiencing high levels of disadvantage to mitigate the effects of poverty and economic deprivation.
  
- Mission Australia recommends that integrated solutions to prevent and address youth violence be developed as a central plank of the broader National Youth Strategy that is currently under consideration. ‘Being safe’ should be one of the key outcomes of the National Youth Strategy, which should facilitate an integrated approach to addressing the incidence and impact of youth violence, and should be underpinned by a ‘prevention first’ approach.
  
- Mission Australia recommends that the development of such a strategy, and any programs that are funded and delivered under this strategy, be guided by the following lessons emerging from the research evidence and practice-wisdom:
  - Place based interventions that adopt a whole-of-community approach have a greater chance of success than interventions that focus solely on creating change at the individual level.
  - A focus on prevention and early intervention can prevent violence from occurring and problems from becoming entrenched, and enhances the life chances of individuals.
  - Drawing from the existing evidence base is important. As well as revealing ‘what works’, it is also a useful reminder of what doesn’t work.
  - It is important that the unique characteristics and the cultural context of young people and their families are understood and respected when designing and delivering interventions. Approaches must be tailored to the needs of young people and their families, and will work

best when young people are empowered to embrace and celebrate their culture. Often this requires building the capacity of the community, as well as the young person at the centre of a program.

- Key transition points in children and young people’s lives are periods of vulnerability and opportunity. Programs that recognise and support children, young people and their families to successfully negotiate these transition points are more likely to be successful than those that do not. These periods of transition also reflect ‘higher risk’ periods in young people’s lives. Knowledge of how these periods of change affect young people is critical to the development of a preventative national youth violence strategy, and programs that build young people’s resilience.
  - An awareness of the gendered nature and effects of violence is critical to the development of a national youth violence strategy
- Mission Australia suggests that consideration be given to developing a national research agenda and supporting further longitudinal research that builds on current available longitudinal data sets and allows the tracking of individual cases over time so that existing indicators of cohorts vulnerable to becoming ‘at risk’ can be refined, and the community’s understanding of this process can be deepened. This would enable areas of concern to be identified as they emerge, and the early development and implementation of targeted, gender-appropriate and developmentally appropriate interventions.

## Mission Australia’s approach to working with young people

Mission Australia is a national, not for profit organisation that works within the community, employment and training sectors. We have been working with young people for 150 years, motivated by a vision for a fairer Australia where all young people feel included and valued and enjoy the support of their families and communities to realise their potential. In 2008-09 Mission Australia supported more than 24,000 young people through nearly 100 youth-specific services located across all states and territories. In addition, we supported a significant number of young people through our homeless, employment and training services.

Mission Australia works with a diverse range of young people across Australia in a variety of settings and delivers a range of programs that are designed purposely for young people. The holistic nature of our work is reflected in our *Outcomes Hierarchy for Pathways through a successful youth* (attached). This provides an overview of the foundations necessary for young people to engage with learning

opportunities and participate fully in the social and economic life of their communities, and to negotiate safe and successful transitions into adulthood. Community capacity, in terms of communities' problem-solving capabilities and their ability to create safe, vibrant and inclusive environments, is also critical to engaging young people and promoting their overall wellbeing. Accordingly, Mission Australia works not only at the individual level with young people, but also with their families, their peers, with schools and other institutions, and at the community level.

Being and feeling safe is one of the foundations of young people's wellbeing. The importance of both physical and emotional safety came through strongly in the qualitative data recently collected by Mission Australia for its 2009 *National Survey of Young Australians*, along with a clear picture of the challenges associated with maintaining wellbeing while balancing the demands of leading full, busy lives.<sup>1</sup> Young people are clearly keen to engage with the broader world and to expand their horizons, yet they also have an appreciation of their vulnerability. They are concerned about violence and understand its multi-faceted impact, including the impoverishing effect that violence can have by impeding people's participation. These types of observations were common among young people and indicate a sophisticated understanding of the causal connections between issues. The data also clearly show that many young people are acutely aware of how issues (stress and depression and illicit drug and alcohol use, for example) can compound and lead to increasingly problematic behaviours and situations. This sensitivity to the interconnectedness of issues is one of the most striking features of the qualitative data and confirms the importance of ensuring that the support available to young people is integrated, and that processes are in place to link young people into service systems before problems escalate.

The notion of providing preventative, holistic support underpins Mission Australia's approach to its work and is a common theme throughout this submission. Although Mission Australia works with people at all stages of the life course and provides services to people in crisis and/or dealing with chronic disadvantage and entrenched problems (in addition to the developmental prevention work it undertakes), Mission Australia is increasingly working with families to support them to negotiate the early stages of their children's life course. In Mission Australia's experience this is directly related to tackling youth violence, a view confirmed by the extensive body of literature detailing early childhood behaviour problems and the pathways to anti-social behaviour and aggression that these can lead to if unaddressed.

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<sup>1</sup> Mission Australia's *National Survey of Young Australians* is the largest survey of its kind in Australia, with 47,735 young people aged between 11 and 24 years participating in the 2009 survey. The 2009 survey was the 8<sup>th</sup> annual *National Survey*, providing Mission Australia with rich sets of comparative 'snapshot' data that allow the tracking of change over time.

The youth-specific programs that Mission Australia delivers take into account the developmental processes specific to the various life-stages of young people and recognise the various physical, cognitive and emotional dimensions of change that can affect how young people respond to support, both structured and informal. These programs include *Reconnect* (an early intervention service to assist young people aged 12 to 18 years who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, and their families to stabilise their housing situation and other facets of their life), alternative education programs (such as *Learning Unlimited*, an Adelaide-based program which provides alternative school settings for at-risk young people to attain their school qualification), *Chill Factor* (a youth violence program for young men), and a range of other place-based youth services (for example, *Onkaparinga Youth Services* in Adelaide and *Creative Youth Initiatives* in Sydney). Mission Australia also delivers youth drug and alcohol rehabilitation services and young offender rehabilitation programs. *Pasifika Support Services*, *U-Turn* and *Youth Assist* are all examples of programs in the juvenile justice area. *Pasifika Support Services*, although no longer in operation, is a culturally responsive program based on multi-systemic theory which prevents young people's involvement in crime, strengthens their wellbeing and resilience and increases the capacity of their families and communities to support them towards productive life pathways. An external evaluation showed that it achieved impressive results in a range of important areas, including reducing re-offending.

Mission Australia notes that the inquiry is concerned with the *impact* of youth violence. This submission focuses to a certain extent on this aspect of youth violence, however in the main it is informed by a solution-focused approach to policy analysis and a desire to share what Mission Australia has learned about reducing this impact through preventative and rehabilitative strategies.

## Term of Reference I

### Perceptions of violence and community safety among young Australians

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Since 2002 Mission Australia has conducted the annual *National Survey of Young Australians*, the largest survey of its kind in Australia. In 2009 of the 47,735 young people who participated *personal safety* was identified as a major concern by around one in five young people across all age groups and genders. *Bullying /emotional abuse* was also identified as a major issue by a similar proportion of young people.

Mission Australia's (2009) publication, *Insights into the concerns of young Australians*, draws on the comments provided by young people who completed the 2008 *National Survey of Young Australians* online. Although concerns regarding personal safety do not differ significantly across gender, females are more likely to identify physical / sexual abuse as an issue of concern. They are also more likely to discuss the issue of *personal safety*, with nearly 90% of the online comments on this matter provided by females. Their responses reflect a general sense of vulnerability, particularly when they are out in the community.

*"Personal safety is a big issue for young women. For me to walk home alone, especially at night, is a big deal and I want to feel safe when I do that."*

(Female, 20 years)

*"I am concerned of something happening to me when I'm walking back from school at about 5:00 pm from after school activities."*

(Female, 12 years)

This is broadly consistent with research conducted by the Australian Childhood Foundation (Tucci et al 2008) which conducted a study of 600 young people aged 10-14 across Australia in 2007. The results showed two in five children surveyed felt unsafe in public spaces including shopping centres, cinemas, sporting grounds and walking to school. This sense of vulnerability was more prevalent among girls' responses to the survey, than boys' responses.

There is significant contention regarding the cause of inordinate levels of fear of violence among the community and young people in particular, and also the underlying causes of youth violence itself. Some research suggests that the portrayal of violence in the mass media is an area worthy of further exploration. This has a significant impact on young people in three main ways: it can 'teach' young people aggressive behaviours, it desensitises young people to violence, and it can generate levels of fear and anxiety that are disproportionate to the actual risk of violence based on the recorded incidence of crime (Anderson et al, 2004; Smith and Donnerstein, 1998). The pervasiveness of media violence and the likelihood that it is one of many contributing factors to youth violence highlights the challenge in developing an integrated response to youth violence.

One of the most concerning implications of young people's perceptions of violence is the disproportionate level of fear that this can engender. This in turn can impact on young people's sense of belonging to and engagement with their community and participation in educational, recreational, social and cultural activities. Local communities may provide many opportunities for



young people to connect and participate, but the actual and perceived level of neighbourhood safety influences if and how a young person will access these opportunities (Mission Australia 2009, Williams 2009). The challenge is to help young people to strike a balance between developing good personal safety habits whilst simultaneously encouraging them to actively participate in their community.

Despite the complexity of the underlying causes of fear of violence, some common themes can be identified in the potential solutions frequently mentioned in the mass media. Broadly speaking, one approach involves an increase in surveillance, censorship and control. Another approach involves building young people's and their families' capacity to create safe nurturing environments, to manage conflict, to identify situational risk-factors associated with violence, and to avert and prevent violent behaviour in low-risk ways. These are addressed in more detail under Term of Reference 5, *Strategies to reduce violence and its impact among young Australians*, however the distinction between these two broad approaches is also applicable to thinking about possible solutions regarding the media's role in young people's perceptions of violence, and the actual incidence of violence.

While personal safety is paramount and increased levels of policing and other forms of surveillance might be a suitable response in some contexts and situations, it does not solve the problem of youth violence nor give people the skills to make their own social environments safer. The capacity building approach most directly related to perceptions of violence involves building young people's media literacy and critical viewing skills and increasing parents' understanding of the impact of media violence as well as enhancing their capacity to make informed viewing choices and counteract the violent messages that their children may be exposed to. This has implications for curricula at all levels of schooling including the early childhood years, as well as media advisory boards and regulatory bodies. It also requires new thinking about how to reach parents and build *their* skills. This is an area that ought not be overlooked, especially in view of recent research with adults which showed that almost all respondents (more than 98%) overestimated the proportion of crimes that involve violence (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, 2008). It is possible that young people's anxieties are linked to adults' (inaccurate) perceptions of the prevalence of violent crime, and that this in turn is linked to the portrayal of violence in the mass media.

The other related dimension of capacity building concerns building young people's understanding of violence and its impact, and equipping them with the skills to communicate and resolve conflict in socially acceptable ways.

### Recommendation 1

- Mission Australia notes the importance of striking a balance between encouraging good personal safety habits whilst facilitating rather than impeding young people's participation in their communities. While it is critical to reduce the risk of victimisation, it is important that strategies developed in response to perceived and actual levels of violence be considered alongside the need to encourage young people's safe participation in the social, cultural and physical environment. This is a challenge not only for young people themselves, but also their families and the wider community.

### Recommendation 2

- Mission Australia suggests that further consideration be given to strategies that build young people's and their parents' media literacy and critical viewing skills and increase parents' understanding of the impact of media violence as well as enhancing their capacity to make informed viewing choices and counteract the violent messages that their children may be exposed to. This has implications for curricula at all levels of schooling including the early childhood years, as well as media advisory boards and regulatory bodies.

## Term of Reference 2

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

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Research shows that there are strong links between alcohol (including binge drinking), other drug use and youth perpetrating and being victims of violence. Young people are the group at greatest risk of alcohol-related harm, which includes physical and sexual assault (NHMRC, 2001, cited in AIHW 2007), with evidence pointing to an increase in incidents of alcohol-related harm between 1997 – 2006 (Australian Police Statistics, cited in Mazerolle 2008). Being young and being male are high risk factors (AIC 2000), although there is a growing trend in the involvement of younger people aged 10-14 years and young women in alcohol-related incidents of harm (Mazerolle 2008).

Among the research revealing links between illicit drug use, alcohol abuse and violence is the *Healthy Neighbourhood Project*, a project involving children in years 6 and 8 which showed that among those who had engaged in binge drinking in the previous two weeks before the survey, the likelihood of having been violent was 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 (Williams et al 2009).

In the *Australian Personal Safety Survey* (2005, cited in ABS 2008) the majority (79 percent) of 18-24-year-old men who were physically assaulted by another male said that the perpetrator had been drinking alcohol or taking drugs, and just over one-third (34 percent) also said that they themselves had been drinking or taking drugs. A considerable proportion (37 percent) of women aged 18-24 years who had been physically assaulted by a man reported that the perpetrator's consumption of alcohol or drugs had contributed to the incident (ABS 2008).

The 2009 National Survey of Young Australians (Mission Australia, 2009b) indicated that around one in four 11 to 24 year olds were significantly concerned about alcohol, which was also more generally a concern for males than females. Other research shows that young men are persistently a 'high risk' group, and that there are also emerging cohorts (for example, much younger people) that might increasingly be considered 'high risk'. This suggests that it is important for research to continue in this area, and that there is perhaps a need to draw on longitudinal research such as the Australian Temperament Project, the Longitudinal Study of Australia's Children and the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children that track individual cases over time (rather than population trends) so that indicators of cohorts vulnerable to becoming 'at risk' can be further refined, and the community's understanding of this process can be deepened. This would enable areas of concern to be identified as they emerge, and the early development and implementation of targeted, gender-appropriate and developmentally appropriate interventions. Such research would help to equip policy makers with the knowledge of which preventative interventions work for which cohorts and at what time, and would in turn promote "measures which support a safe passage for all ... through the high risk years" (AIC, 2000, p. 1).

Mission Australia has experience in working with some cohorts that are at high risk of engaging in violence, or who are enmeshed in cultures and lifestyles where violence is relatively normalised. Some of these programs – such as offender rehabilitation programs, designed for young people who have previously engaged in serious violent offending – are based on a multi-systemic approach. Evaluations of the impact of this approach show that it works well as it recognises the multiple factors underlying disengagement, anti-social behaviour, AOD use and violence. A particularly effective aspect of these programs is the recognition of the need for the goals of interventions and the behavioural changes they achieve to be reinforced in multiple settings, so that change can be sustained. This involves not only educating young people themselves about how to reduce the risk of violence when consuming alcohol or other drugs, and how to communicate effectively and resolve

conflict, but also educating others in their social contexts, such as parents, peers, and those who work in schools, recreational and sporting clubs, licensed venues and so on. This reinforces the need for an overarching strategy that takes into account the role that others currently play and potentially could play in reducing youth violence.

A study of juvenile detainees (Payne, 2006) identified that of the sample of 'violent-only offenders' 86% had used alcohol in the past 6 months, 79% had used cannabis over the same period, 43% had used amphetamines and a quarter ecstasy. For those young people who have chronic drug and alcohol issues and who are at high risk of experiencing violence or self-harming, there are relatively few services around the country which have programs designed specifically for them. Mission Australia has conducted primary research with Edith Cowan University into young people's process of reducing or ceasing substance use and has found that their journey away from AOD use is markedly different from adults and requires different support mechanisms (Wilson et al 2008). This is an important and under-researched, under-serviced and under-funded area that warrants further consideration.

Given the significant numbers of young people who consume alcohol (more than 70 percent [AIHW, 2005]) and the strong link between alcohol consumption and youth violence, there is clearly merit in programs that reduce alcohol intake and minimise harm. There is compelling evidence that education programs that seek to reduce alcohol intake (rather than those that promote abstinence) and build young people's capacity to minimise harm and manage situations where they or their friends are exposed to alcohol and its attendant short term risks have a significant and positive impact on young people's alcohol-related behaviour. The *School Health and Alcohol Harm Reduction Project* (SHAHRP) is one such program. This program reduced alcohol consumption at risky levels and in absolute terms, delayed the use of alcohol, and reduced the incidence of harm associated with alcohol consumption. Further, it was found to have an impact on several cohorts, including early non-drinkers, experimental drinkers, and early risky drinkers (see the National Drug Research Institute website for further details). Several success factors have been identified:

- Young people were involved in the design of the program which ensures that it is grounded in their reality and relevant to young people.
- The program is interactive; students are provided the opportunity to practise safety and harm reduction behaviours in safe environments;
- The program is developmentally appropriate; phases of the program are designed to be delivered to young people at life stages when they will be most relevant, most meaningful and have the most impact.

- ‘Booster’ sessions are provided at the time research suggests that prevalence rates (of alcohol use) increase.

These success factors are replicable and constitute sound principles for the development of other types of capacity building programs.

Mission Australia’s own research confirms the need for programs such as SHAHRP, and in particular program components that build young people’s capacity to translate learning into action. For example, the 2009 *National Survey* found that younger people (aged 11-14) are more likely to be concerned about drugs and alcohol than the older respondents, with the qualitative data revealing a level of anxiety about their capacity to deal with exposure to drug-taking and peer pressure.

*“I think peer pressure is something that I’m quite worried about ... because it makes lots of those things like drugs or alcohol worse. You might say that you won’t be silly with things like that but you don’t know what will happen in different settings when you are under peer pressure.”*

(Female, 12 years)

*“I don’t want to be pressured into drugs.”*

(Female, 14 years)

*“I hope no one offers me drugs.”*

(Male, 13 years)

The data from the survey also show that family, friends and relatives are who young people generally turn to for advice and support. In view of this, Mission Australia suggests that programs that build parental and other relatives’ capacity are important ways of strengthening young people’s support networks, enhancing their resilience, reinforcing their knowledge, and building their capacity to manage difficult situations.

It is equally critical to build peers’ capacity. Overwhelming, friends are the ‘first to know’ of young people’s struggles; while family and other relatives have an important and trusted place in young people’s lives, young people are *most* likely to turn to their friends for advice and support (Mission Australia, 2009). Mission Australia suggests that peer programs could be expanded to great effect, especially those which seek not only to impart information about alcohol, drugs and violence, but also to build the learners’ understanding of “what useful help looks like” (see MacNeil and Mead, 2003, for detailed information on the elements of effective peer support). As MacNeil and Mead

detail, this involves promoting critical learning, a sense of community and mutual responsibility among circles of friends, and an ability to set limits. Peer support is also one of the most flexible and all-encompassing forms of support available. Critically, it is present and available in contexts where formal support or adult guidance may not be immediately at hand. Including this element of capacity building (in addition to knowledge building) multiplies the reach and benefits of the program.

### **Recommendation 3**

- As alcohol consumption is a significant and known factor in incidences of youth violence, Mission Australia recommends increased investment be made in evidence-based, developmentally appropriate programs, such as the *School Health and Alcohol Harm Reduction Project*, which have a proven impact on alcohol related behaviours.

### **Recommendation 4**

- Mission Australia strongly recommends that building the capacity of parents and other relatives assume a prominent place in strategies and initiatives to tackle youth violence (particularly strategies aimed at minimising harmful alcohol-related behaviour), since parents and other relatives are influential figures in young people's lives and play an important role in supporting the development of young people's capabilities.

### **Recommendation 5**

- Peer programs, if well designed, are particularly effective ways of building young people's knowledge and skills, and strengthening young people's support networks. They are also excellent investment value if the educators not only impart information, but build the learner's own peer support capacity. This multiplies the reach and benefits of the program. Mission Australia strongly recommends significant investment in programs that build young people's knowledge of alcohol, drugs and violence, provide them with the tools and strategies to deal appropriately with the issue and seek help and support if required, *and* build the learner's own peer support capacity as part of a broader, comprehensive investment strategy to address youth violence.

### **Recommendation 6**

- Mission Australia recommends that further investment be made in developing and making available developmentally appropriate rehabilitation services for young people with alcohol and other drug issues who are at increased risk of experiencing violence. Such services should be designed and adequately funded to address the range of interrelated issues that

compromise these young people's immediate health and wellbeing, and their medium and longer-term life chances.

#### Recommendation 7

- Mission Australia suggests that consideration be given to developing a national research agenda and supporting further longitudinal research that builds on current available longitudinal data sets and allows the tracking of individual cases over time so that existing indicators of cohorts vulnerable to becoming 'at risk' can be refined, and the community's understanding of this process can be deepened. This would enable areas of concern to be identified as they emerge, and the early development and implementation of targeted, gender-appropriate and developmentally appropriate interventions.

## Term of Reference 3

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

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In Mission Australia's *National survey of young Australians 2009*, of the 47,735 respondents around one in four identified *bullying/emotional abuse* as a major issue, a decline from 2005 where one in three identified it as a major issue. Other research suggests that one in four year 4-9 students frequently experience bullying in Australian schools (Child Health Promotion Research Centre, 2009).

Mission Australia's (2009) publication *Insights into the concerns of young Australians* draws on the comments provided when young people completed the 2008 survey online. These show the long-term effect that *bullying/emotional abuse* can have. Two of the online comments received clearly reveal the seriousness of the impact that bullying can have on young people:

*"I have clinical depression because of the abuse and bullying I receive at school."*

(Female, 16 years)

*"Bullying is also a concern of mine. A few older girls have teamed up against me at school calling me names, and I'm too scared to tell a teacher about it."*

(Female, 12 years)

The qualitative data from the 2009 survey also shows the seriousness of the consequences of bullying:

*“I think bullying is a major issue because the way kids can treat people is cruel and this inappropriate behaviour can cause suicide / death.”*

(Male, 12 years)

*“Bullying leads to self esteem issues, when you have no self esteem you do things and let things get done to you that can either be dangerous or just demeaning.*

*You can only live a good, successful happy life if you feel you deserve it.”*

(Female, 17 years)

One of the concerning findings of Mission Australia’s annual surveys is that they suggest that some young people are not seeking support and assistance to deal with bullying, and feel unable to do so. Bullying is a phenomenon that also has implications for other students who may not be the direct subject of the bullying, as it can affect students’ ability to learn and engage with activities at school (Olweus et al 1999). This suggests that bullying may affect and have far-reaching impacts for a significant number of young people.

It is critical to ensure the physical, psychological and emotional safety of young people in all the spheres in which they are active: their home, at school, through cyber technology, at work and within their community. This means fostering a culture that does not support bullying or violence in any form, and developing pro-social behaviours within the home, school and community contexts. Critical to achieving this is strong, loving and respectful relationships (hence the importance of strong and positive family relationships across each stage of development, and strong social networks), the setting of clear expectations, a focus on positive behaviours, and the avoidance of coercive discipline and hostile parenting (Braithwaite, 2000; Parada, 2008). Although some researchers (see Parada, 2008, for example) are particularly clear about the important role that schools can play in preventing bullying (“a whole-school intervention is still the single best intervention available for bullying”), a strong case can be made that the *prevention* of bullying begins in the early childhood years.

This aside, young people need to know that the school system (or the context in which the bullying occurs) will support them. It is clear from Mission Australia’s primary research that at least some young people do not feel that they can be adequately protected. A critical first step in tackling bullying is to ensure that schools have processes in place to respond to incidents of bullying, and that



these are sufficiently robust to give young people confidence in them. Also, in line with the recommendations put forward regarding alcohol, drugs and violence, there is evidence of the need for capacity building programs that provide young people with the tools and strategies to seek support if they are experiencing bullying, and to develop leadership skills that enable them to discourage bullying among peers.

#### **Recommendation 8**

- Mission Australia suggests that consideration be given to reviewing the resources available to support schools to develop 'whole school approaches' to bullying, identifying where further support is needed, and developing resources that build schools' capacity to develop and implement strategies to reduce the incidence of bullying. The implementation of such strategies should be accompanied by evaluation plans which provide insight into the level of confidence students have in such strategies.

#### **Recommendation 9**

- Mission Australia suggests that, alongside the implementation of selected 'whole school approaches' to bullying prevention, a community capacity building anti-bullying approach be explored. This would involve the broader community and in particular sporting, recreation and social groups outside the school context, where young people may still be vulnerable to bullying and there is an opportunity to reinforce anti-bullying messages and model pro-social behaviours.

## **Term of Reference 4**

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

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There is a well established, inter-disciplinary research base confirming that youth violence is a product of a number of complex factors and that the characteristics of the community in which young people live can play an influential role in the incidence and nature of youth violence experienced within that community. For example, research into developmental pathways and locational disadvantage (see for example Homel et al, 2006 and Vinson, 2007) shows that disadvantage can be concentrated in particular communities, and that high levels of disadvantage play

a role in the day to day challenges faced by parents. Combined with other risk factors, adverse life circumstances can impact on the developmental pathways being taken by children and young people and place them at increased risk of experiencing difficult transition periods and developing conduct problems. These environmental factors are associated with a range of social issues that affect parents, children and young people, including: low levels of attachment to a parent, poor parental skills, low parental educational achievement, abuse and violence in the home, the use of coercive discipline, low connectedness to school and the community, poor educational attainment, family and peers that support antisocial behaviours, unemployment, barriers to social mobility, and a culture that views violence as acceptable (Krug et al 2002; Butchart et al 2004; Homel 2007; Edberg 2009; Williams et al 2009). Homel, a leading Australian expert in criminology and developmental and early intervention approaches is particularly firm on the connections between socio-economic factors and violence: 'poverty does clearly lead to violence... the process of teaching young children to regulate violent behaviour is far more difficult in poor than in well-off communities because parents and schools are faced with immensely greater barriers in achieving their goals of socialization and provision of safe, nurturing and loving environments than their counterparts in more privileged suburbs' (Homel, 2007, p 3). Williams (et al, 2009, p. 29) further supports this in a study which shows 'a 10 percent decrease in the likelihood of violent behaviour for each increase in socioeconomic quartile.'

These risk factors interrelate and compound the difficulties for children and young people in localities experiencing high levels of disadvantage to embark on pathways that enable them to achieve their potential. This emphasises the need to adopt a life course approach to violence prevention that is viewed within the broader social ecology, rather than focusing on individual or family deficits (Homel 2007; Edberg 2009), and which focuses on building protective factors.

However, it also suggests that more needs to be done to address youth violence than the manipulation of risk and protective factors. While Mission Australia and other agencies who work with disadvantaged young people and their families are able, to varying degrees, to reduce the presence and severity of risk factors and to enhance protective factors, it is work which countervails underlying, larger problems such as poverty and social exclusion. Mission Australia's experience is consistent with evidence (see for example Howell et al, 1995) that shows an ecological approach to building strengths and addressing needs is more effective than treating anti-social, problematic and violent behaviour as a problem that is internal to the individual. This means extending service delivery beyond the individual and involves the additional challenge of changing the 'social and economic conditions that are known to give rise to conflict, harm, social distress, crime and criminalization, particularly poverty and inequality' (Goldson and Muncie, 2006, p. 99). This

reinforces the idea that the responsibility for addressing youth violence rests not only with the young people and their families at the centre of the problem, but also with the broader community.

#### Recommendation 10

- Mission Australia strongly recommends that investment in early childhood prevention strategies such as *Pathways to Prevention* and other evidence-based strategies that prevent and/or reduce anti-social behaviours be recognised as an integral part of preventing youth violence. The development of strategies to tackle youth violence should explicitly recognise this and design tiered levels of intervention. Early intervention, developmental prevention programs should be viewed as a potentially critical platform that underpins more targeted initiatives that can be provided as and where required. This approach would be particularly valuable in communities experiencing high levels of disadvantage and youth violence. See also the recommendations provided in Term of Reference 5, below.

#### Recommendation 11

- Mission Australia suggests that investment in employment initiatives and education programs for *parents* be seen as an important component in preventing youth violence. As well as providing parenting support, early intervention developmental programs should ideally also be able to connect families to labour market and education and training programs that facilitate their inclusion in the economic life of the community. This is especially important for families living in areas experiencing high levels of disadvantage to mitigate the effects of poverty and economic deprivation.

## Term of Reference 5

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

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*“Intervention [aimed] at preventing or mitigating adolescent antisocial behaviour can occur never too early and never too late” (Loeber & Farrington 1998 cited in Smart et al 2004).*

Mission Australia welcomes the Government’s intention to develop a national strategy for young Australians and the broad priority areas to be included in this strategy. The successful achievement

of these priority areas – for example, “strengthening early intervention with young Australians to help prevent any problems getting worse and to help young people get their lives back on track” (The Hon. Kevin Rudd, MP, 2009) – will go a long way towards preventing and reducing youth violence and its impact among young Australians.

Given the complex and multidimensional nature of youth violence, Mission Australia believes that the achievement of this goal would be well-supported by identifying ‘Being Safe’ as a key outcome area within the national strategy for young Australians. A strategic focus on this goal, as part of a broader national strategy, would facilitate an integrated approach to this issue and help to determine the types of interventions that are required and the levels at which interventions need to be targeted, and it would support the Government to make informed investment decisions. Underpinned by a ‘prevention first’ approach, it would also significantly reduce the incidence and therefore impact of violence on young Australians, and actively contribute to the achievement of the majority of the priority areas identified as central to the Government’s national strategy for young Australia.

While much is known about youth violence, its causes, and the interventions which are effective, a broader and more detailed evidence base – particularly one that is grounded in an Australian context – would be invaluable in deepening decision-makers’ knowledge of the various dimensions of youth violence and improving the effectiveness of programs and interventions. To this end, the development of a youth violence research agenda that complements and informs the implementation of the strategy, and points towards future directions, is highly likely to have a material impact on young Australians’ lives.

As noted earlier, Mission Australia delivers a broad range of programs that contribute to preventing and reducing the incidence and impact of violence on young Australians. Our approach is in keeping with Loeber and Farrington’s view that it is ‘never too early’ and ‘never too late’ to work with children, young people and their families, and that appropriately targeted, evidence-informed approaches to youth violence can have a transformational impact on young people, including those previously involved in serious violent offending. Other studies – such as the temperament longitudinal study – also confirm this view: change happens and is in fact common throughout young people’s lives.

The following observations and recommendations concerning strategies to reduce violence and its impacts on young Australians are informed by:

- Practice wisdom derived from Mission Australia’s work with children, young people and their families over the course of many years and a unique perspective on relevant theories, trends and practice which have emerged and changed over this time.
- The synthesis of this practice wisdom with primary and secondary research.
- Externally evaluated success in working with ‘high risk’ young people and young people in contact with the criminal justice system and supporting them to lead productive, fulfilling lives.

Short profiles of various programs are provided where appropriate to illustrate the headline statements and recommendations.

***Place based interventions that adopt a whole-of-community approach have a greater chance of success than interventions that focus solely on creating change at the individual level.***

Strategies that target a particular social competency and/or are delivered in a setting removed from the young person’s social context have limited success in achieving sustained change. A whole-of-community approach, however, affects the broader social environment, develops a broad base of support, creates multiple opportunities for supporting and reinforcing pro-social behaviours and sustaining change, and achieves long term results (Hawkins & Catalano 2005). This type of support is critical, for example, for program participants who are endeavouring to maintain new skills learned in one particular setting, in school, family and other environments.

A whole-of-community approach can also address the culture and conditions of a community which may put children and young people at risk. It is therefore important that strategies seeking to address the risk factors associated with youth violence and to enhance protective factors consider the individual’s place within the broader community context, and also focus on family and peer relationships, other influential actors in young people’s lives (such as educators and those in sporting clubs), and structural factors such as policing strategies, media influences, recreational opportunities (or the lack thereof) and so on. This approach is in keeping with the Government’s *Social Inclusion Agenda* which recognises the importance of place based approaches, particularly within neighbourhoods and communities that experience multiple levels of disadvantage (for example, economic deprivation, income inequality, the prevalence of drugs, and high levels of violence). This means that tailored approaches that are developed in partnership with local communities – as opposed to a ‘cookie cutter’ approach – are required if programs are to gain the support of the community and inspire a sense of shared endeavour (Social Inclusion Priorities 2009).

***A focus on prevention and early intervention can prevent violence from occurring and problems from becoming entrenched, and enhances the life chances of individuals.***

*'While risks and indicators for problems are identified early, intervention often does not occur until later in life when these problems are entrenched and their effects more widespread' (Sanson & Havighurst 2009 p7).*

While initiatives are required to address the current incidence of youth violence and to support young people to proceed down constructive pathways, there is a compelling case for preventative and early intervention approaches that result in violence becoming 'unthinkable' as early on in a person's life as possible (Braithwaite, 2000). Research shows that working in the early childhood space, from the antenatal period right through to school transitions, can have a positive impact on children's and young people's behaviour (Krug et al 2002; Homel 2008), especially if those who are 'first to know' have the skills and knowledge required to identify early warning signs and connect children, young people and their families to appropriate programs.

*Pathways to Prevention* is one of the most rigorously evaluated early intervention, developmental prevention projects in Australia. A partnership between Griffith University and Mission Australia, *Pathways to Prevention* is a universal, early intervention developmental prevention project which supports children, families and communities before problems emerge and focuses on children's transition to school in one of the most disadvantaged urban areas in Queensland. The program combines child-and-family-focused programs that work across a suite of domains within a community development and ecological framework. The project engages many of the most vulnerable families in the area and helps build connectedness within families and with key institutions such as schools. The program has been shown to have a significant impact on a range of child outcomes such as pro-social behaviour and academic performance. The former is particularly relevant in efforts aimed at reducing incidences of violent behaviour (Homel et al 2006).

***Drawing from the existing evidence base is important. As well as revealing 'what works', it is also a useful reminder of what doesn't work.***

The research base in the area of youth violence which focuses on 'what works' is comprehensive, with evaluations suggesting that it is investment in these programs and maintaining program fidelity that will make a difference. Meta-analyses of violence intervention programs illustrate how difficult this is. For example, the University of Colorado's *Center for the study and prevention of violence* reviewed violence intervention programs against three criteria: evidence of the deterrent effect of

the program and the strength of the research design; the sustained effects of the program; and, whether the program had been replicated in multiple sites. Of the 800 programs that were reviewed, the Centre identified that of these, only 11 were 'model programs' (broadly, these included programs with components such as: home visitation, life skills / social development and competence, adult mentoring, developmentally based early childhood and family therapy) and 17 'promising programs'. The 'model' and 'promising' programs shared the following characteristics: they promoted developmentally appropriate ways of working with clients at key transition points (early childhood, transition to school, transition to adolescence); and, they identified and worked with schools as a place for intervention and multi-systemic approaches that involved the whole community.

What does *not* appear to work, where youth violence is concerned, are programs that are of a punitive and coercive nature. For example, boot camps have proven to be ineffective and in some cases increase the incidence of youth antisocial behaviour (Krug et al 2002). There is growing knowledge about other punitive approaches that do not work, including punitive approaches in schools (i.e. school suspensions) which serve to further disconnect students from learning environments, and young offenders being tried in adult courts. It is also now well-established that incarceration "intensifies the need for significant support, post-release ... and [its] effectiveness is also questionable, given the strong association between early imprisonment and offending behaviour into adulthood" (Mission Australia, 2009; AIHW, 2008).

There are significant risks associated with the implementation of programs without a strong theoretical and/or evidence base. As well as channelling community resources and funds towards endeavours that may have little success, in some cases programs or approaches lacking in theoretical and design integrity can do harm.

***It is important that the unique characteristics and the cultural context of young people and their families are understood and respected when designing and delivering interventions. Approaches must be tailored to the needs of young people and their families, and will work best when young people are empowered to embrace and celebrate their culture. Often this requires building the capacity of the community, as well as the young person at the centre of a program.***

Culture influences the types of violence that are prevalent in some communities and not others, and it impacts significantly on the uptake and effectiveness of programs. It is a critical consideration in developing appropriate responses at a local level, as recent primary research shows. The following

is from Mission Australia's recent publication, *Young people and the criminal justice system: New insights and promising responses*.

Mission Australia's *Pasifika Support Services (PSS)* is a holistic, young offender rehabilitation program designed for people of Pacific background in South West Sydney. More than 250 young people have voluntarily participated in the program in the past three years. An external evaluation found that the program achieved impressive reductions in re-offending (65% of young participants with a 12 months follow on period did not re-offend) and other important outcomes such as family reconnection, re-engagement with school, and other training and employment outcomes. A unique feature of PSS is the case management model and underlying principles including:

- A holistic approach to improving outcomes, through working in all the life domains (e.g. education, health, family etc).
- The engagement of community based workers and leaders with a Pacific background and those who have previously worked within the community, to inform service development and delivery.
- A focus on building the 'cultural competency' and capacity of those who play a significant role in participants' lives, such as peers, family members, teachers, community workers and staff in the criminal justice system to enhance their ability to work effectively with Pacific young people and their families..
- Flexible and culturally relevant programs and service delivery that enable young offenders (and their families) to understand and fulfil the requirements of institutions such as the justice and educational systems.

Given the importance of the family, PSS undertakes a significant amount of family mediation in the home, including with siblings. This encourages open communication between young people and their families, and helps the family understand and reconcile the range of expectations placed on young people by their parents, peers and institutions. It increases parents' knowledge of Australia's education, justice and employment systems and the expectations such systems have of their children. (Mission Australia 2009a)

***Key transition points in children and young people's lives are periods of vulnerability and opportunity. Programs that recognise and support children, young people and their families to successfully negotiate these transition points are more likely to be successful than those that do not. These periods of transition also reflect 'higher risk' periods in young people's lives. Knowledge of how these periods of change affect young people is critical to the***



***development of a preventative national youth violence strategy, and programs that build young people's resilience.***

There are many key transition points for children and young people, including the commencement of pre-school, transitioning to school, transitioning to adolescence and moving from school into the labour market. While a source of excitement and opportunity, these transition points are also a time of change and potential instability, and can be critical periods for which support is required. As Homel (2004) writes, these transitions are easier if there are social supports in place such as friends and social structures to provide information as needed. However, some young people require additional support. A deeper understanding of these critical periods of transition and how these affect young people, particularly those with fewer protective factors to buffer them from challenging times, would not only build the collective knowledge base on resilience but it would also more clearly illuminate the 'high risk' periods where more intensive effort might be required. This is information that is critical to the development of a preventative national youth violence strategy.

***An awareness of the gendered nature and effects of violence is critical to the development of a national youth violence strategy***

In order to prevent violence against women, it is increasingly recognised that programs need to acknowledge and challenge the power imbalances between women and men and the cultures in our society that may perpetuate these imbalances (Unifem 2001). Mission Australia's '*Chill Factor*' program, a violence intervention program for young men, provides participants with an opportunity to explore the issue of violence and aggression and the impact that this has on their lives and the lives of those around them. One of the key program underpinnings is a feminist framework that identifies the power dynamics within society and the influence that these can have on young men's use and understanding of violence and aggression.

**Recommendation 12**

- Mission Australia recommends that integrated solutions to prevent and address youth violence be developed as a central plank of the broader National Youth Strategy that is currently under consideration. 'Being safe' should be one of the key outcomes of the National Youth Strategy, which should facilitate an integrated approach to addressing the incidence and impact of youth violence, and should be underpinned by a 'prevention first' approach.

### Recommendation 13

- Mission Australia recommends that the development of such a strategy, and any programs that are funded and delivered under this strategy, be guided by the following lessons emerging from the research evidence and practice-wisdom:
  - Place based interventions that adopt a whole-of-community approach have a greater chance of success than interventions that focus solely on creating change at the individual level.
  - A focus on prevention and early intervention can prevent violence from occurring and problems from becoming entrenched, and enhances the life chances of individuals.
  - Drawing from the existing evidence base is important. As well as revealing ‘what works’, it is also a useful reminder of what doesn’t work.
  - It is important that the unique characteristics and the cultural context of young people and their families are understood and respected when designing and delivering interventions. Approaches must be tailored to the needs of young people and their families, and will work best when young people are empowered to embrace and celebrate their culture. Often this requires building the capacity of the community, as well as the young person at the centre of a program.
  - Key transition points in children and young people’s lives are periods of vulnerability and opportunity. Programs that recognise and support children, young people and their families to successfully negotiate these transition points are more likely to be successful than those that do not. These periods of transition also reflect ‘higher risk’ periods in young people’s lives. Knowledge of how these periods of change affect young people is critical to the development of a preventative national youth violence strategy, and programs that build young people’s resilience.
  - An awareness of the gendered nature and effects of violence is critical to the development of a national youth violence strategy

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# In a fairer Australia...

Young people are:

Communities are:

VISION/  
ULTIMATE  
OUTCOME:

↑

CONTRIBUTE TO:

↑

COMMUNITY-  
LEVEL  
OUTCOMES:

↑

CONTRIBUTE TO:

↑

MISSION  
AUSTRALIA  
SERVICE-  
LEVEL  
OUTCOMES:

