

Submission to the Inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians

Australian Institute of Criminology

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Introduction

- The Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) is Australia's national research and knowledge centre on crime and justice.
- The Institute seeks to promote justice and reduce crime by undertaking and communicating evidence-based research to inform policy and practice.
- The AIC is governed by the *Criminology Research Act* and has been in operation since 1973.
- The AIC is pleased to have the opportunity to contribute towards the Committee's Inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians.
- There is a great deal of evidence to demonstrate that young people are disproportionately both the perpetrators and victims of crime, including violence, in Australia.

Key points from AIC research

The AIC has conducted and is currently conducting research to contribute towards the evidence-base on the extent and impacts of violence on young Australians.

Homicide

- The AIC's National Homicide Monitoring Program (NHMP) collects and analyses data provided by each jurisdiction's police service on every recorded case of homicide in Australia. The program has been in existence since 1989 and is recognised as one of the world's best homicide databases.
- Data on children from the NHMP indicate that during the period from 1989–90 to 2006–07, **753 children** (aged 0 to 17 years inclusive) have been victims of homicide in Australia.
- Children have comprised 13 percent of all homicide victims in Australia since the inception of the NHMP.
- For each year of the NHMP collection, the proportion of homicide victims that were children has varied only slightly, from a low of nine percent to a high of 15 percent. The largest proportions of child homicide victims were aged less than one year (22%), 17 years (11%), one year (9%), 16 years (8%) and two years (7%).

- NHMP data therefore indicate that during the 18 years of data collection to date, over half of all child victims of homicide have been either less than three years of age, or 16 to 17 years of age.
 - Infant victims are predominantly killed by a parent or guardian (80%). Approximately half of child homicide victims killed by a parent are killed by mothers; the other half are killed by fathers.
 - Approximately one-third of older children (aged 15 to 17 years) are killed by peers.
- The number of child homicide victims for each 12 month counting period has remained reasonably stable since 1989–90, ranging from 30 deaths in 2000–01 to 53 deaths in 2001–02.
- Indigenous children have comprised approximately 11 percent of all juvenile homicides in Australia during this period – indicating there is a considerable overrepresentation of Indigenous children among child victims of homicide (see Dearden & Jones 2008).
- The AIC is currently conducting more detailed research into homicide victimisation against children in Australia (Dearden, Richards & Tomison under review).

Armed robbery

- The AIC’s Armed Robbery Monitoring Program, which analyses data provided by each jurisdiction’s police service on every recorded case of armed robbery, has found that persons aged 18 to 19 years are more likely than any other age category to become the victims of armed robbery.
 - The most recent round of data collection showed that males aged 18 to 19 years were victimised at a rate of 149.7 per 100,000.
 - Females aged 18 to 19 years were also the age group most likely to become victims of armed robbery, at a rate of 34.9 per 100,000.
- In general, both males and females aged between 15 and 24 were substantially more likely to be the victims of armed robbery than other age groups (although the rate of victimisation was much greater among males) (Smith & Lewis 2009).
- Data from the Armed Robbery Monitoring Program also show that in recent years there has been an increase in the rate of victimisation among males aged 15 to 17 years.
- Two-thirds of armed robbery *perpetrators* were found to be aged 24 years or below. The average age of armed robbery perpetrators was 23 years, which is a decrease of one year from previous data collections on armed robbery.
- AIC research on juveniles’ contact with the criminal justice system (Richards 2009) shows that juveniles are responsible for approximately one-third of all robberies.

Violence against women

- The AIC, in partnership with VicHealth, recently conducted a large survey on community attitudes towards violence against women. This survey included a sample of 16 to 17-year-olds.
- The final report from the survey, which is available from the VicHealth website, found age to be strongly correlated with attitudes about violence against women, with respondents aged between 16 and 20 years holding attitudes significantly more supportive of violence against women than older respondents.
 - Respondents aged 16 to 20 were more inclined than older people to agree with some misconceptions about rape (for example, that it is a result of male sexual urges; that it is usually perpetrated by strangers; and that women are partly responsible for rape if they are drunk).
 - Statistical analysis of these data by the AIC found that 16 to 20 year olds were less likely to agree that 'forcing a partner to have sex' and 'slapping and pushing a partner to cause harm or fear' were 'very serious' forms of violence against women than respondents in other age categories. Younger respondents were also more likely to agree that 'women who are raped often ask for it' than respondents in the other age categories (Victorian Health Promotion Foundation 2009).
 - A number of potential explanations for this were proposed by the report's authors, including: young people's limited personal experience of intimate relationships, their limited exposure to tertiary education and/or community debate, and the influence of youth and media cultures, which may reinforce violence-supportive cultural messages.

Children exposed to domestic violence

- Family discord, as indicated by studies of the children of battered women, has been identified as one of the most influential forms of childhood deprivation in terms of subsequent adolescent delinquency and disturbance (Tomison 2000).
- Although estimates vary considerably, research has consistently shown that 'children are disproportionately represented in homes where [intimate partner violence] occurs'; this may be especially the case for particular groups of children, such as infants (Bedi & Goddard 2007: 67).
- Children who 'witness' or are exposed to domestic violence experience a range of problems as a result, including a range of social and mental health problems. In the aftermath of a family violence incident, children may have to assist an injured mother, deal with the involvement of police, leave the family home and/or cope with an absent father (Tomison 2000).
- Even when not a deliberate target of violence, children who is exposed or 'witnesses' domestic violence will often exhibit the same constellation of symptoms as children who have been abused (physical abuse and sexual abuse) or neglected .
 - There is some evidence that observing significant others being maltreated (especially siblings and parents) by someone with whom the child identifies

with closely, is more intimately related to the intergenerational transmission of violence than the child actually being maltreated her/himself (see Tomison 2000).

- The Australian component of the International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS) conducted by the AIC, found that of women who had experienced partner violence and had children living with them at the time, 36 percent reported that their children had been exposed to a violent incident (Mouzos & Makkai 2004: 90).
- A Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) study found that Indigenous children were significantly more likely to have been exposed to physical violence against their mother or stepmother than the average. Forty-two percent of Indigenous young people reported being exposed to violence against their mother or stepmother, compared with 23 percent of all children (Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care as cited in Flood & Fergus 2008: 11).
- The AIC is currently conducting a short research project on children exposed to, or who 'witness' domestic violence. The research will involve a desktop review of the extent and impacts of witnessing domestic violence, as well as initiatives to address this problem, including legislative provisions, other government strategies, and programs operated by community organisations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the AIC would make a number of interrelated points to the Committee in relation to the impact of violence on young Australians:

- Research consistently demonstrates that 'victims' and 'offenders' are not entirely discrete cohorts of young people. Recent research by Professor Kathy Daly (2009) from Griffith University on assaults of young women, for example, clearly shows that the boundaries between victim and offender can become very blurred.
- Peer-on-peer violence among young people is common. Young people are more likely than older Australians to be both the perpetrators and victims of a range of violent offences, including assault, sexual offences and homicide. Our understanding around the peer-on-peer violence is emerging, and the AIC believes that this is a key area to understand if the impacts of violence on young Australians are to be reduced.
- There are clear pathways for young people from 'victim' to 'offender', and this needs to be recognised. Young people who have been victimised are at an increased risk of offending.
- Finally, it is important to assess the factors that influence the apparent rise in youth violence, including substance abuse, attitudes to violence, and the effects of new media.

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