Submission on the impact of violence on young people

Contact

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Background:

While I make this submission as a private citizen I would like to outline my professional involvement in matters around youth and violence as this points to my expertise in the field.

I currently sit on the management committee of the NSW Rape Crisis Centre and I am a Ph.D candidate in the Journalism and Media Research Centre at the University of NSW. My research is examining issues around cyber bullying, online sexual harassment and 'sexting'. I also work with young people all over Australia (this year I have spoken at conferences to over 15 000 young people about sexual assault) and I have been a public spokesperson for survivors of sexual assault. I am also a regular media commentator on issues around sexual violence in the community.

The following submission has been put together in response to the anecdotal evidence I have collected from speaking with thousands of young people about their experiences of, and attitudes towards violence in the community. While this submission does not include quantitative data, the information included is based on qualitative analysis of the engagement that I have had with young Australians, typically aged 13-22.

Summary:

This submission addresses two of the terms of reference:
-Perceptions of violence and community safety among young Australians
-Strategies to reduce violence and its impact on young Australians.

This submission addresses a number of myths around violence including that violence is committed by strangers, that young people are perpetrators but not victims of violence, that sexual assault is the victims fault, that women provoke assaults, that alcohol is to blame for violence and that verbal assault is not as damaging as physical violence.
The submission also explores the limitations of current strategies and points to a need for more progressive strategies as have been trialled in Australia and elsewhere.

Terms of Reference:

Perceptions of violence and community safety among young Australians:

Having consulted extensively with young Australians, it is my observation that young people are disadvantaged by particular myths around violence. These myths include:

1) That young people are perpetrators but not victims of violence
2) That physical and sexual violence is most often committed by strangers
3) That victims of violence are often responsible for having provoked the violence
4) That alcohol is to blame for causing violence
5) That verbal assault (including bullying, taunting, cyber bullying etc) is not as damaging as physical assault

1) That young people are perpetrators but not victims of crime

Unfortunately young people are often stereotyped as being perpetrators of crime. While a small percentage of young people do commit violent acts, more often than not young people are at risk of becoming the victims of violence. With regards to sexual assault and familial assault (domestic violence) young people are more at risk than any other demographic.
They are also less likely to access victims services due to practical reasons (cost of counselling, inability to drive to services, not wanting to tell parents where they are going), psychological reasons (feeling scared, overwhelmed, unsure and unjustified), and social reasons (feeling an obligation to protect the perpetrator, particularly if the perpetrator is a family member or friend of the victim, or if they are financially dependent on them).
Young people are also less likely to know what support structures are in place to assist them, or they may believe that those structures are in place to support other 'types' of victims. Further to this, the very nature of sexual assault and familial assault leaves victims feeling insecure and lacking in self esteem. This in turn makes it harder for victims to assert themselves and ask for help.
Added to this, victims may often be financially dependent on their abusers and this also makes it difficult to escape the cycle of violence. The result is that **young people may be most at risk of experiencing violence, and yet they are the least likely to report this violence or to feel entitled to support.**

2) That physical and sexual violence is most often committed by strangers

Like the rest of the population, many young people have been schooled in the myth that physical and sexual violence is most often committed by strangers (stranger danger). The reality is that most perpetrators are known to victims. In 70% of sexual assault cases the perpetrator is a family member, friend, or someone that the victim goes to school or work with. In the remaining 30% the perpetrator is someone the

victim met out that night (usually at a bar, club or party). Sexual assault by a stranger with a weapon constitutes less than 0.1% of sexual assault cases and yet curiously this is the dominant rape narrative that the media perpetuates.

The result is that most victims look at their own experiences and compare them with media representations and conclude that what happened to them was "not a 'real' rape", the logical extension being that they are not really entitled to assistance, and they are not entitled to report it as a crime. An additional problem is that when victims disclose to family or friends, **very few family members or friends will immediately recognise a sexual assault as a crime unless that assault was committed by a stranger and involved a high degree of physical violence**.

In my public life I have talked extensively about being abducted, strangled, bashed and held at blade point by a man who attempted to rape and kill me. Clearly these 'stranger danger' crimes do occur, but they are atypical and not at all representative of the experiences of most victims. Through my workshops with young people I have been able to put my own experience into context. I have now received literally hundreds if not thousands of disclosures from young Australians who have been sexually assaulted. Almost none of those assaults were committed by strangers and very few involved any physical violence. Unfortunately my own experience of sexual assault has been used in the media to reinforce a stereotype which delegitimizes and distorts the actual experience of rape and sexual assault for most victims. **This stereotype makes it difficult for young people to speak out about their ordeals: either they do not recognise that they have been assaulted (because their experience diverged from the stereotype) or because they are fearful that their family and friends will not immediately recognise their experience as a crime**.

A note on THE INTERNET:

Underpinning discussions about online threats there looms the figure of the predatory paedophile. Similar to the 1980's counterpart of the 'seedy' man in the trench coat who lurked behind shrubberies waiting to grab children, the modern paedophile is imagined sitting behind a keyboard, looking groom and attack unsuspecting, vulnerable children. However, as we know in offline circumstances, those who sexually prey on children are rarely unknown to them. More often than not, they are family members or others who have direct access to children. While the hysteria around the 'trench coat paedophile' has legitimized a number of 'stranger danger' education programs, these programs have had limited success as they do not acknowledge that it is highly atypical that a paedophile is a stranger.

We are now seeing online debates play out in a similarly problematic direction. While paedophiles are using the internet to contact young people, my current research suggests that **the overwhelming majority of unwanted online sexual advances are made by people known to the child (often peers).** While such contacts are often dismissed as 'normal, sexual socialisation', **these contacts are actually far more difficult to negotiate than contacts made by complete strangers**. Fear of loss in social standing, rejection, appearing prudish etc. place pressure on young people to respond to unwanted sexualised contacts.

Similarly, online networking sites are increasingly being used to cyberbully young people. Perpetrators of cyber bullying are almost always known to the victims. Mobile and cyber bullying is not merely an extension of playground bullying. It is far more insidious as children can be reached in their bedrooms and at all times in the day. The attacks are often more acidic as the perpetrators can hide behind the anonymity of the internet.

3) That victims of violence are often responsible for having provoked the violence

Particularly in the cases of familial assault and sexual assault, **victims are often blamed for the actions of perpetrators**. This is a way of shifting responsibility off the perpetrator and onto the victim. This also provides an excuse/ defence for the perpetrators behaviour. In many cases young victims internalise this rhetoric and end up blaming themselves. **The result is that they are less likely to report abuse or to access help.** Unfortunately there are many myths that support and protect perpetrators. In the last year I have heard the following statements made by young people:
-If girls don't want to get raped, they should not get so drunk
-If a girl puts herself in harms way, she is asking for trouble
-Prostitutes can't get raped
-It's not real rape if it's your husband or boyfriend
-You should know better than to provoke him if you know he has a temper
-He's really a nice guy, he was probably just drunk
-If you get into a car and go up to a hotel room with a bunch of guys and you get yourself raped, it's obviously your fault for being stupid and slutty
-Men can't help the fact that they are naturally stronger and have testosterone
-Girls who get raped should have asserted themselves more.

It is important that we recognise that these attitudes are not specific to young people and in fact they are found at all levels of society. However **these attitudes are used to deflect responsibility and culpability away from perpetrators** (instead alcohol, testosterone, the victim and lack of female agency are held responsible). It is important that these attitudes are addresses and challenged in early education.

4) That alcohol is to blame for causing violence

Often alcohol is blamed for violence. Sometimes the victims alcohol consumption is blamed ("if she is going to get that drunk, she has to accept that she is asking for trouble") and at other times the perpetrators alcohol consumption is blamed ("he's a nice guy, he just got drunk"). Attributing blame to the victim's blood alcohol content is illogical and works off the problematic assumption that "the more drunk she is, the less responsibility he has to take for his own behaviour". There are also many problems with blaming alcohol for male aggression. While there is considerable

evidence to suggest that alcohol and drugs may fuel violence, it is important to note that there are many men and women who consume alcohol who do not commit violent acts. It is also worth noting that some of the most atrocious rates of violence against women are found in countries where alcohol is banned altogether. While responsible drinking is to be encouraged, it is important that we continue to pay close attention to the underlying social and gendered attitudes that feed into the decision to be violent. Unfortunately **drugs and alcohol are often used as a scapegoat**. The result is that the more complex socio-economic, cultural and gendered arrangements which contribute to rates of violence are veiled or dismissed. **The reframing of violence as being an alcohol issue deflects attention away from the core issues around respectful relationships, and culturally determined notions of what constitutes acceptable behaviour.** From speaking with young people, I have observed that violent attitudes are more prevalent in individuals, and individuals are more likely to commit violent acts if their peer group has a high tolerance of violence. While encouraging responsible drinking may be one way to curb some rates of violence, **changing peer attitudes and acceptance of violence may be a far more effective way to alter negative behaviour**.

5) That verbal assault (teasing, taunting, spreading rumours, cyber bullying etc) is not as damaging as physical assault

Unfortunately many people in the community only recognise violence if it takes a physical form. Similarly the damage caused by violence is often measured in physical terms (through medical reports, evidence of bruising and physical harm etc).
For young people though, teasing, harassment and cyberbullying have massive and long lasting impacts on self esteem and self worth.
The impacts of verbal bullying and verbal assault are more difficult to recognise than the symptoms of physical assault. It is important, however, that we address these issues early on with youth.

Strategies to reduce violence and its impact among young Australians:

In order to develop suitable strategies to reduce the impact of violence on young Australians it is important to understand the limitations of previous strategies.
These include but are not limited to:
- a disproportionate focus on stranger danger
-strategies which only target victims
-myths around the value of self defence
-strategies which assume that male aggression is inevitable/ strategies which assume that men are the enemy
-strategies which fail to include men as being part of the solution
-weaknesses in sex education

1) A disproportionate focus on stranger danger

As has been discussed, victims of sexual and physical assault have often been abused by people known to them. Despite this many violence prevention strategies focus on stranger danger.

The reasons for this are complex but in essence, many individuals find it hard to accept that loved ones or people they know could be violent. It is far easier to imagine perpetrators of these crimes as being faceless, unknown others.

The result, however, is that many programs do not acknowledge or address the reality of violence for young people.

2) Strategies which target victims

Many strategies target the victims and put the onus on victims to modify their behaviour or dress. Protective measures (such as telling women to watch their drinks and not walk home alone) may sound like good advice, but this advice does little to address the actual causes of violence, and if anything it normalises violence as being inevitable.

3) Myths around the value of self defence

While self defence is often pitched as the solution to rape and sexual assault, the problem is that in many cases (particularly when the offender is a family member or friend of the victim) the restraints are not physical to begin with: they are psychological. Teaching a physical strategy to respond to a psychological restraint not only places the onus on the victim to defend themselves but such a strategy fails to take into account the actual dynamics at play in sexual assault.

4) Strategies which assume that male aggression is inevitable/ strategies which assume that men are the enemy

Unfortunately many programs work off the basis that male aggression is inevitable. These strategies alienate men and normalise violent attitudes. My firm belief is that the overwhelming majority of men are horrified by sexual violence.

5) Strategies which fail to include men as being part of the solution

Because men are often discussed as 'the enemy' they have rarely been included as part of the solution. The result is a level of apathy and a diffusion of personal responsibility. In recent years The White Ribbon Foundation has done some good work on this and this should be explored and built on.

6) Weaknesses in sex education programs

Moira Carmody (2009) has argued that there are a number of problems with current sex education programs:
-they have rarely been developed in consultation with youth

-they are rarely evaluated by youth
- some are abstinence based (these programs leave students feeling unsure of how to protect themselves and ashamed of their sexual desires).
-most programs focus on the biological "plumbing" of sex but neglect matters around intimacy and negotiating consent
-very few programs reach teens on their terms
-many programs talk about sex in sterile environments, completely divorced from context

In response Moira Carmody has developed a highly successful sexual ethics education program. Other programs like Love Bites also do some very good work onb developing healthy relationships. These programs should be explored and rolled out to all schools.

Service Provsion

From my own personal experience I have witnessed a number of problems with service provision.

There is still a lack of a counselling services available for victims of sexual and domestic violence. The centres in place are underfunded and cannot meet client demands. In my own case I was only able to receive free counselling at Royal North Shore Sexual Assault Service because the assault had occurred within 72 hours of me presenting and because I had a police report to substantiate my claims. As we know many victims do not report immediately and indeed a large number do not report at all. Because of such a high demand, counsellors cannot see anyone who has been sexually assaulted and must have screening processes in place to manage the sheer number of clients seeking assistance.

Having sat on the board of the NSW Rape Crisis Centre I have often been very distressed over the enormous amount time that is spent trying to acquire the funding that is needed simply to stay afloat. The people who work in the sector should be able to get on with their jobs, rather than spending so much time fund raising and chasing down grants.

I have also been very disappointed with the police handling of various cases (my own and others). While sexual assault detectives are well trained the problem is many victims often have to go through many untrained hands before an expert in brought in. Nor are victims always made aware of their rights, and nor is protocol always followed.

Where to from here?

On a positive note, there have been some wonderful advances made in the area. Forty years ago there simply were not services to support victims of domestic violence or sexual assault. Similarly, when victims like myself came forward we would be labelled as 'damaged goods'. Due to a shift in societal attitudes (brought about due to the work of

feminists) women who speak out about sexual assault are now beginning to be labelled as brave and heroic.

However there is still work to be done. I am very pleased to be involved in this inquiry and I hope that some of the recommendations I have made will be considered. In particular I would like to endorse Professor Moira Carmody's sexual ethics work as well as the Love Bits program.