October 10th 2009
Submission to the inquiry into the impact of violence on young people

We are writing as two Developmental youth workers employed by two organizations based in the Penrith Local Government Area. Spyns Incorporated and St Clair Youth and Neighbourhood Team Incorporated. Both organizations work utilizing community development methods towards a socially just society. Both organizations are small - medium sized NGO's and receive funding from The Department of Community Services under the Community Services Grants Program (CSGP) funding stream.

We have collaborated on this submission as part of our membership of the Nepean Domestic Violence Network a collegiate of organizations working collaboratively in the Penrith Local Government Area. Advocacy is one role of the Network.

We will be addressing each of the terms of reference of the inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians To the House standing committee on Family, community Housing and Youth.

Perceptions of violence and community safety among young Australians;

Young people recognise that we live in a culture pervaded by violent images and stories. Media stories of violent street gangs cover the front pages of our news headlines. This builds anxiety and fear amongst young people around becoming a victim of violence which reinforces the perception of safety in numbers which is one reason that young people hang out in groups.

In public spaces young people tend to congregate in groups; to socialise in highly visible places that provide some safety. These places tend to be in and around shopping centres which are the new main streets. The wider community perception of larger groups of young people are seen as being intimidating, threatening, troublemakers or at best the public tolerates them. The relationship between authorities managing these public spaces and the young people usually results in security guards or Police moving young people from centres to surrounding streets which in turn puts the young people at risk.

To improve community safety for young people will require re-thinking our planning laws. Legislation is required to encourage developers and Local Government to consider the needs of young people when planning shopping centres. Youth friendly public spaces deter young people from exposing themselves to danger by hanging out in dark backstreets. Youth friendly community space where young people can socialize together as part of the wider community enhances safety of young people and creates safer communities for us all. More information on this issue can be accessed through the No Standing: Young people and community space research project published by Youth Action and Policy Association 1997. www.yapa.org.au

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

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

The age of 12-24 years is a time of great change for the adolescent mind. Due to adolescent brain development the capacity to negotiate risk especially in boys is significantly impaired. The onset of puberty sees the fastest rate of growth in the life span. Rising levels of testosterone increase the desire for risk taking and excitement.

Young people, more than any other age group represent both the highest numbers of victims and the highest numbers of perpetrators of violent behaviour. What also needs to be considered is the violence that young people can turn against themselves. Self harming behaviour is on the increase, this is as a result of increased opportunities by young people to inflict bullying on others via information technologies. Young people use self harming behaviour as an unhealthy coping strategy for stress and as a result of lowered self esteem.

There are significant links between the use of alcohol, illicit drugs and violence. Young people who frequently use drugs and alcohol are at increased risk of becoming involved in violent situations due to placing themselves in unsafe situations and substance use can impede their ability to negotiate conflict. Young people's attitude towards alcohol is to drink to get drunk and by the fastest means such as Binge drinking which is an ever increasing issue in youth culture. Young people who have experienced traumatic events or are from homes affected by domestic violence and disharmony are at and increased risk of turning to drugs and alcohol. Young people who have suffered abuse and neglect as children are also at increase risk of turning to substance abuse.

The National Drug Strategy 2001 survey identified in (Bennett and Rowe 2003) found that in the 14-19 year age group 32% boys and 26% of girls were regular drinkers. The short term problems as a result of these figures represent drunkenness, accidents, violence, arrests, unprotected sex and unwanted pregnancies. In the longer term alcohol dependence is a possibility, health concerns such as liver damage and brain damage.

With increasing consumption of alcohol and drugs also comes an increased risk of sexual assault for both young women and young men. The consumption of alcohol and drugs can lead young people to put themselves in situations where they are more vulnerable to attack. Young people and particularly young men are less likely to report sexual assault to the Police.

In relation to violence in young people's relationships negotiating consent between partners becomes more complex when either party is under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Substance use combined with sexual relations can lead to allegations of date rape and or inhibit ones ability to decline advances.

Bennett and Rowe 2003 identify that the biggest killer of people aged 14-34 is alcohol. For young people alcohol and risk taking behaviour pose the greatest threat to life.

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

Bullying behaviour impacts young people in ways that are detrimental to a young person's emotional and physical well being. It can reduce their self esteem, cause anxiety which can lead to anxiety disorders, depression and suicidal ideation. This behaviour can also create school and social issues.

Bullying behaviour sits within the wider culture of violence that pervades our society. We are experiencing increasing use of information technologies such as the internet and mobile phones being used as a means of bullying and causing harm to young people.

The recent Youth Action Policy Association conference held in Sydney showcased a new short film targeting young people that highlight the extreme outcome of bullying. Information on the film can be found at http://www.bestenemies.com.au/ . This program provides opportunities for schools and youth services to run programs to address issues of bullying and discuss ways this behaviour impacts on young people.

Youth programs targeted at young people in schools funded through the Department of Community Services under the Better Futures program have been addressing bullying and its effects, in schools locally in the Penrith LGA.

The media constantly portrays stories about violence in society. However there are no significant campaigns portraying information about the importance of healthy respectful relationships between peers and other young people in the community. Campaigns such as those described could be run on youth oriented social networking sites. To act against Bullying in any meaningful way requires an all of Government response with National campaigns educating the population on bullying and its effects highlighting the need for a caring community and respectful relationships. Conflict resolution skills must become

an integral part of education to assist young people with real skills to avoid conflict building to violence.

Social and economic factors that contribute to violence amongst young Australians;

Social factors contributing to violence being perpetrated against young people include any difference from the norm, being overweight, being introverted being a refugee. Bullying and violence are used by the perpetrator to intimidate and belittle those different from themselves. Young people who have disabilities, a mental illness, whose race or sexual preference is different from that of the perpetrator, are at increased risk of becoming victims of violence.

Violence can be exacerbated by the use of mobile technology to attract many young people to vicinity as we saw in the Cronulla race riots.

Some Economic factors that contribute to the impact of violence on young people are lack of money which can contribute to not fitting into the norm such as not wearing brand named clothes or having money to access to public transport leaving young people vulnerable due to having to walk home by themselves late at night. Being homeless can also contribute to young people becoming targets of violence.

Economics coupled with poor impulse control due to adolescent brain development contribute to young people choosing to commit crime and perpetrating violence against members of the public.

Strategies to reduce violence and it's impact among young Australians

The challenge to reduce the impact of violence on young Australians is difficult. Strategies need to act on a number of fronts simultaneously. Strategies we feel also need to be targeted across the life span of children, young people and parents.

Domestic Violence has a significant effect on young people. All of Government approaches to target Domestic Violence in our community are primary strategies to reducing the impact of violence on young people. Currently there exists a program to educate young people about violence in intimate relationships and sexual assault. The program is called 'Love Bites' this program aims to teach young people about domestic violence and sexual assault within intimate relationships between young people. More information can be found at this web site http://www.napcan.org.au/programs

Associate Professor Moira Carmody has developed a program for 15-24 year olds looking at sexual ethics. The book and training package Considers how to address the prevention of sexual violence within dating relationships, focuses on showing how the

challenges faced by young people negotiating their sexual lives can be addressed and outlines ethical practices and brings together research and other scholarship on sexuality and violence prevention. Ms Carmody has also developed a website discussing sexual ethics http://www.sexualethics.org.au/ . Ms Carmody is currently a member of the 'National Council to reduce violence against women and their children'. This body has recently released a report which can be found here http://www.dvirc.org.au/UpdateHub/FACS_37004_Violence_Against_Women.pdf

Affordable supported Housing specifically identified for young people that are escaping family or intimate violence is needed to enable young people to avoid staying in unhealthy situations.

Disadvantage needs to be considered for children and young people who have been abused and neglected, who are part of families engaged in domestic violence and young people who have poor social connection. Programs are needed at the preventative end that build resilience internally, increase social cohesion and foster inclusion. Funding programs that are run locally in the community with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds can provide protective factors for young people and assist young people to make informed choices.

Youth services are soft entry points into the service system network. Youth workers working with disadvantaged young people will often hear of violence that has taken place in a young persons life. Youth workers have the ability to identify the types of violence and make referral to services that can assist young people to overcome traumatic life events associated with violence or to work with stakeholders to minimize opportunities for violence to occur locally.

The Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre (DVIRC) based in Victoria , has produced many valuable resources to assist work with young people; they have developed a fantastic website for young people "bursting the bubble" providing information on abuse and domestic violence http://www.burstingthebubble.com/.

The DVIRC have also produced a youth friendly website called when love hurts which can be found here http://www.dvrcv.org.au/whenlove/ . This provides a lot of information on dating violence and respectful relationships. The equivalent website for young people in NSW http://au.reachout.com/ this website is not explicitly for young people experiencing violence, as with the Victorian website, but covers a number of topics.

Public space needs to be designed with consideration to safety of young people and the availability of youth friendly designated areas in and around shopping centres. More research is required in this area to manage the tension between commercial interests and the interests of young people. Coupling good design with youth engagement

strategies is imperative to ensure good relations between business interests and young people who use their centres.

Reviewing transport needs of the community and providing regular transport that is youth friendly in identified hot spots for violence would enhance protective factors for young people Such as getting home safely shuttle bus programs.

For older young people 18 and above looking at strategies that target late night drinking spots, having food available, shuttle buses to transport patrons between venues. Increasing Police presence or security measures to reduce the opportunities for violence.

National campaigns targeted at creating a culture that encourage civil society that provides clear messages about respect for self and for others including respectful relationships may assist with reducing the incidence of violence. http://www.chooserespect.com/ is a program that takes a strengths based approach.

We refer the committee to the White Ribbon foundation report titled "An assault on our future The impact of violence on young people and their relationships". The report can be found at www.whiteribbonday.org.au . They suggest that vastly increased efforts need to be made and resources mobilized at National, State and local levels in the area of Primary prevention of violence against women and girls with a particular focus on children and young people. They suggest a multifaceted prevention strategy, which engages men and young boys is essential to maximizing positive outcomes for children and young people. The report further suggests that it should be recognized that there are no 'quick fixes' for the long term social change towards which prevention efforts are directed. However, there is a sound and growing body of evidence for the effectiveness of this work.

On behalf of the Nepean Domestic Violence Network, we would like to thank you for the opportunity to have input into the inquiry into the issue of young people and violence.

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References
Bennett D & Rowe L, 2003; What to do when your children turn into Teenagers; Doubleday Press.