



**Response by The Foundation for Young Australians to the  
Parliamentary inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians  
October 2009**

**Introductory remarks**

The Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) welcomes this inquiry into the impact of violence on young Australians by the House Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth. This is timely given the recent growth in community concern over the impact of violence on young people.

This submission draws upon findings from research and programs designed and administered by FYA, and comments specifically on violence experienced by young people in the school environment. Recent research commissioned by FYA has also investigated the impact of racism and homophobia on the health and wellbeing of young Australians, and its connection with violent behaviour in schools.

**FYA programs and research**

FYA is currently engaged in two partnerships involving program delivery and research that is of relevance to the Inquiry:

*No Regrets*

This program was formulated in 2009 in consultation with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and Step Back Think to address the impact of violence on young people. Its objectives are to develop skills, attitudes and behaviours that enable young people to respond safely to potentially violent situations; develop strategies and actions to promote violence prevention amongst young people; and develop skills, attitudes and behaviours that form the basis for respectful relationships.

The program comprises a 90 minute workshop with up to 30 students in each of 10 Victorian schools (seven metropolitan and three regional), followed by focused small group work with students in collaboration with community partners. It runs from November 2009 to April 2010. The evaluation findings will be available in May 2010.

*The impact and experiences of racism, homophobic bullying and victimisation on young Australians*

FYA is conducting two main strands of research that may be of interest to the Inquiry. Firstly, in November 2009, FYA will publish a research report on the impact and experiences of racism on the health and wellbeing of young Australians compiled by a team led by Professor Fethi Mansouri at Deakin University.

Secondly, FYA is conducting further research into the impact of homophobic bullying and victimisation on the health and wellbeing of young Australians. Jen Sainsbury, Facilitator of Granting and Social Investment at FYA, was awarded a Churchill Fellowship in 2009 to undertake this international research project.

## **Evidence base**

*Current research - including the research commissioned by FYA - consistently identifies school as the primary setting for the experience of racist and homophobic abuse for young Australians:*

- Of nearly 700 students interviewed nationally, 80% from non-Anglo backgrounds and 55% from Anglo backgrounds reported experiences of racism. Those most affected cited a constant sense of exclusion, a pervasive fear of physical or verbal attack, and a reluctance to go to school (Mansouri et al. in press)
- 74% of homophobic abuse directed at same sex attracted young people occurs at school (Hillier et al. 2005, p.41)
- The impact of homophobic abuse is wide-reaching. Australian studies show that 8%-11% of young people experience sexual attraction to the same sex, while American studies estimate that nine students in every thirty are in some way affected by same sex attraction i.e. having a gay or lesbian parent, sibling, relative or friend, or questioning their own sexuality.

*Concerns expressed by young people in the course of research are related to:*

- The connection between alcohol and violence
- The connection between boredom and alcohol (and consequently violence)
- Peer pressure/peer attitudes as a major contributor in violent behaviour
- Fear of the mob mentality: e.g. gate-crashers at parties or youth gangs
- Violence as a sign of strength in a group; and conversely, pacifism as a sign of weakness
- Increasing use of weapons among young people.

*In its programmatic work, FYA has noted concerns expressed by university-age volunteers related to:*

- The influence of drugs and alcohol in potentially violent situations
- The arbitrary nature of many violent attacks; fears for safety
- Not knowing how best to challenge aggressive behaviour in peers
- Not knowing how best to manage large groups drinking in public.

*Concerns expressed by school staff suggest:*

- A perception among young people that violence in schools is less serious than street violence
- Increasing numbers of school yard fights
- Increasing support for violent behaviours among peer groups
- Community complacency; lack of community support to prevent violence
- Lack of education about violence prevention in schools.

The following is a direct quotation from a volunteer facilitator with advocacy group Step Back Think (<http://stepbackthink.org/>):

“My concerns are mainly focused on this bizarre invincible mentality within young people. The main issues often stem from drugs and alcohol and perhaps not having a place to go. This leads to wandering the streets, and often in fights. As for the people involved, it tends to be a much higher percentage in men becoming violent - but I think it is absolutely vital that the young females are taught not to encourage (and often start) fights, whether they be verbal or physical. I don't think high-school students want to be preached to (which is often the case around the Melbourne schools) but they want to meet like minded, young, cool people who will speak to them in their language and speak of their personal stories -

ie. James Macready-Bryan's story. It's important that people know how the smallest comment/look can ruin a life, and therefore avoid this... From what I have learned, violence only fuels more violence and anger. It is absolutely essential that kids and young adults are taught to (no matter how intoxicated) step away."

### **Concluding remarks**

The FYA believes that the all-pervasive nature of violent behaviour in Australia is best tackled at the school level using a whole school approach. This requires:

- Involvement from school leadership
- Intervention to address the homophobic and racist culture in some schools (including training for teachers)
- Development of new curriculum that can fit with existing models
- Partnership with community organisations and open dialogue with parents
- Fostering of the student voice.

### **About The Foundation for Young Australians**

FYA has a long history of producing high quality, substantive and internationally recognised research on the state of young people in Australia. Bolstered by the work of its Education Foundation division, FYA's research agenda has a renewed focus upon reforming education systems, improving young people's health and wellbeing, and fostering partnerships beyond the classroom.

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### **References**

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