

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Impact of Violence on Young People.



“Voices Against Violence”

Our vision – for the future.

A community that is safe, where there is no threat or fear of unprovoked violence.

Our mission – our reason for being.

To encourage, support, promote, develop, implement or influence initiatives that will lead to a positive cultural change towards eliminating acts of unprovoked violence.

www.voicesagainstviolence.org.au

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Background to the “Voices Against Violence” Group.

“Voices Against Violence” was formed as a reaction to the 2008 assault of our son. As parents we have been devastated by the effects of an act of mindless violence.

“Voices Against Violence” is our effort to try and save others from going through the same suffering we have.

Our initial action was to create a Facebook group that was called ““Voices Against Violence” – Speak out for proper penalties”. The focus on punishment was largely driven by our need for justice. It was not before we realised that the answer to the issues of violence was much more than just “harsher penalties” and that a broad spectrum approach to community and cultural change was required. As a result the “speak out for harsher penalties” was dropped to give the group its current name.

Membership of our group has grown to over 3400 members.

The picture on the cover of this submission is of our son Richard, after his 3rd brain surgery as a result of his assault (he has recently undergone his 6th surgery). It is used in all “Voices Against Violence” branding and serves as a graphic and poignant reminder of the impacts of violence.

Our aim is to continue to work towards encouraging and driving efforts to achieve a positive cultural change towards unprovoked violence.

Our efforts include

- awareness activities such as news paper and magazine articles radio interviews about our story and group
- Influencing and lobbying for policy change. Discussions have been held with various State government representative (including Opposition Leader Ted Baillieu)
- Participation by way of delivering speeches at public rallies.

We are currently in the discussions to make arrangements to deliver a presentation to approximately 400 university age students with Deakin University’s Waurin Ponds Campus highlight the true impact of violence in the hope they are more aware think about themselves and their friends when they are having a “big night out”.

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Perceptions of violence and community safety among young Australians;

The perception of violence and community safety needs to be considered from numerous angles

- the perception of the general community and;

- the perception or attitude toward violence by the perpetrators

What is the perception of the general community? What is the perception or fear amongst the community of being on the receiving end as a victim, either directly or that someone close to them will become a victim?

“Voices” contends that the community has a genuine perception of fear and that the level of violence within the community has reached a point whereby the feeling of community safety has been taken away.

Our views on community perceptions are well founded. A consistent theme of the many views posted on our Facebook group is that it is clear that the community perception of violence and community safety is one of grave concern.

The community is concerned for their safety and expresses a genuine sense of loss of security. Consistently our members express a sense of grief at the loss of that sense of safety. Parents do not feel that their children, and themselves, are safe to go about their lives.

It is clear that the community call for a response to the issue of escalating violence has been heard and it is pleasing that this inquiry by the Federal government is being undertaken.

“Voices Against Violence” argues that there is link between the increase in violence and the decrease in values and respect for others amongst young people.

Young people have lost the sense of right from wrong and their perception towards violence is one that there is no real harm in it. They do not have an understanding of the impacts of their actions.

Young people are influenced by modern images of violence through television, movies and computer games that glorify celebrate violence. Young people have become desensitised to the reality of violence.

Computer games although often graphic, are simply that – just graphic pictures and animations on a screen that are not perceived by the viewer as real.

Television and movies show unrealistic scenes of violence whereby someone can take a savage beating and continue to get up and keep fighting.

This depiction of violence without impact or consequence provides a view that real violence has no impact and there is no consequence for it. Young people that have become desensitised to the consequence of violence also have no sense of respect for authority because they do not see a genuine consequence for their actions

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

Academic research will show the links in terms of numbers and measures. Conclusions will be drawn based on data that there is a direct correlation between alcohol and violence.

“Voices Against Violence” is not qualified to make a definitive judgement or to make any scientific or research based observations about the link between alcohol/drugs and violence. However we are in agreement that alcohol in particular is a big factor.

We offer an additional consideration that alcohol causes people to act with reduce inhibitions. The question needs to be considered why many people will drink and not become violent –yet others resort to violence when alcohol removes there inhibitions.

The true question that needs to be asked is what has caused the offender to resort to violent behaviour as opposed to something else like humour or laughter (laughter)

Alcohol is a related issue – in some cases may provide the ignition but the bomb is the underlying lack of respect for others. Alcohol triggers the ignition – lack of personal values or apathy towards others causes the explosion.

It is the underlying degradation of common values and respect that emerges and presents itself as acts of violence by some individuals whilst under the influence of drugs and alcohol.

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

The prevalence of and exposure to bullying leads to the breaking down of social values. Bullying undealt with provides the bully with reinforcement that the behaviour is “ok”. If not dealt with at the youngest age – bullying provide a means to an end. A means that inevitably escalates as the child grows and faces more serious situations. Their “learned” behaviours is a response of aggression - bullying steps up to more violent acts in order to achieve a result.

Voices is strongly of the view that the erosion of respect for each other and respect for authority amongst young people is a key factor.

Social and economic factors that contribute to violence by young Australians

While there will be ample academic research that links social and economic standing with violence. As mentioned above whilst it is recognised that environmental factors can contribute they cannot be attributed as the sole cause.

To demonstrate a point - some people will form a view that poverty leads people to take desperate measure to survive. In many cases it leads to crime. This is true to some extent but poverty is not an excuse for violence – “I’m so poor I have to hurt someone to get by – simply is not an excuse.

Whilst acknowledging the difficulties of those with limited financial resources it does not excuse bad parenting – “I’m too poor to teach my kids right and wrong” – is not an excuse.

It is this loss of sense of right and wrong in young people that “Voices Against Violence” contends is the underlying and most significant cause of the increase in violence.

As argued above in relation to alcohol and drugs the solution to this problems needs to identify and understand why some people resort to crime and violence as a remedy to adversity. Why do others within the community resort to hard work to get out of a bad financial situation.

Strategies to reduce violence and its impact among young Australians.

As indicated throughout this submission the problem of increasing violence is influenced by the social culture of the community. Any strategy to address the problem needs to be a wholistic approach to a cultural change.

We have demonstrated throughout this submission that the underlying problem that needs to be investigate, understood and fixed is the question of what has happened to the values of our society that has removed much of the respect for those around us

No single measure in isolation will achieve a change. A broad spectrum approach across multiple levels within the community needs to be implemented.

“Voices against Violence” encourages and supports the development of;

- Education programs in our schools that instil stronger values in our children,
- Awareness programs and advertising campaigns that raise the understanding of impact of violence
- Improved the management and control of licensed venues, AND
- A review of relevant legislation and the judicial system to ensure appropriate
- Consequences for perpetrators of violent assault that act as proper punishment and an effective deterrent.

This is about cultural change and the government is the key driver of that change. We need a government that provides strategic leadership with foresight to look ahead at what needs to be done and.

“Voices Against Violence” is strongly of the view that just as this is a societal and cultural issue it will take all members of our community to step and accept some degree of responsibility. We do all need to do more - but we need a government that provides stronger leadership and set the tone and context for the community we live in.

Parents need to teach their kids and set the foundations for positive values. Parents of young adults we need to keep talking to them so that they don't lose sight of what's right. Don't let them become so entrenched in a youth culture that sees violence as entertainment.

Schools need to reinforce and educate those values - but also to practice what they preach. Schools need to be able to effectively punish bad behaviour. We need a society and culture with respect for authority where those in authority can hand out a realistic consequence. Many schools currently run values based programs, however these programs need to be constructive and real and avoid pushing a “warm and fuzzy – lets all be nice to each other” message. Such programs must teach consequences. They must outline there is a punishment consequence for inappropriate behaviour, and they must teach that there is an impact consequence for the receiver. Put simply children need to be taught the impact of hurting someone else.

Education and Awareness programs need to be developed and run that are innovative and effective that raises the social conscience of our youth and makes them aware of the impacts of their actions.

Television industry “code of conduct” in relation to classification needs to be reviewed. Shows that include violence must be restricted to an appropriate timeslot. It is recommended that any show carrying a violence rating should also include compulsory community advertisement showing and supporting an anti violence message/campaign. It is not sufficient to simply warn that a show contains violence without promoting a counter message that violence is real and has severe consequences

Pubs and clubs need to be proactive in managing the issue. Licensing conditions do need to be reviewed and reconsidered. Is our reputation as a city with a vibrant night life worth as much as a reputation as a safe and liveable city? Responsible service of alcohol needs to be embraced and enforced

Security Personnel need to be trained to be proactive and recognise early signs of a situation before it escalates. They need to be trained to mediate and counsel patrons so as to diffuse and prevent matters escalating into violence

Young guys are probably the biggest influencers - they need to all step up and stop their stupid mates before they do something stupid. Don't encourage the behaviour by relishing in the stories of the fight he got into on the weekend - tell him he is an idiot.

If you've got a mate that gets aggressive when he has too much - stop him before he drinks too much.

Young Girls also play a big part. Also all need to stand up and give a clear message they don't want to be with someone that likes to punch on. Girls need to send a clear message that they are not impressed by thuggish behaviour

More police and stronger powers for them are a start - but police are toothless tigers without the support of the courts.

Appropriate consequences - The courts and judges need to get tougher on violent offenders – regardless of age.

Stronger sentencing and appropriate parole processes

A call for harsher penalties is the loudest and most adamant call from the 3400 members of our group. The community is sick of seeing the perpetrators of violent acts give a penalty that amounts to little more than a slap on the wrist.

While acknowledge the importance of rehabilitation of young offenders, it should not be to the complete exclusion of an appropriate punishment for their crime. From a personal perspective, in my son's case the second offender that kicked him in the head while he lay lifeless in the gutter received a 12 months sentence. He has recently been paroled after serving just 6 months.

This penalty does not equate to the suffering he inflicted with that fateful kick. There must be a genuine consequence that meets the action. The purpose of the penalty is twofold; firstly to punish the offender and to act as a deterrent to others.

In this example neither purpose has been served.

It is strongly recommended that an appropriate review of the judicial system is considered to ensure that judges operate and imposes sentences that adequately reflect community sentiment.

A recent sentencing outcome generated considerable media attention and negative publicity due to the apparent leniency of the sentence. In his response to the media the Chief Magistrate made comments to the effect that academic research has shown that if the general public had a fuller understanding of all the considerations of sentencing they are more likely to accept more lenient sentences.

"Voices Against Violence" disputes this and suggest that there is an equally and more compelling argument for stronger sentencing if those academics and judges had a ore fuller understanding of the impacts of violence from the perspective the victims and their family they would be more likely to lean towards stronger sentences.

It is also important that a review or consideration of parole procedures is considered as part of this inquiry also. Whilst in young people the stated focus is on rehabilitation it would appear that in many cases the parole process has become just a process to go through to provide early release without adequate consideration if the offender is a "changed person"

The sentence is set by the court to ensure the punishment should fit the crime. However in granting an early release the fit of sentence to crime is undermined.

Careful consideration needs to be given – is this a changed person? Has the offender shown that he is no longer the violent thug that he was when he committed his crime?

In most case Victim Impact Statements are used in the sentencing process. It is suggest that the original Impact Statement be used as a tool to measure how well offenders understand and appreciates the impact of what they did.

Don't simply ask then to read it again. Ask him what the impacts of his actions where. If he shrugs his shoulders and say "I dunno" - he doesn't get it. If the pain and suffering he caused, if the sentiments of an impact statement didn't leave an indelible impression on him – he still doesn't get it.

If he cannot articulate in his own words what he caused – he cannot claim to appreciate the seriousness of his crime.

If he cannot genuinely understand what he did – how can he genuinely regret it without knowing what it is that he regrets and why? If his regret and remorse is centred on himself and the inconvenience to him – he still has a long way to go.

Any Parole board needs to be confident that the offender has changed. They need to be sure he will not return to the same circle of friends and associates that glorify and relish violence. What contact has he maintained with that crowd – or has he made genuine efforts to distance himself and turn his life around?

Questions should be asked what efforts have been made to denounce his own actions – how does he talk about what he did to his peers? Is it with a sense of regret or pride?

Is he “rehabilitated” enough to admit he was a violent thug that was wrong - in forums of his peers, where he can show he has learnt from his mistakes and where he can have an influence on other youth. Or does he simply tell the “workers” that have an influence on his release date what he thinks they want to hear while he maintains his attitude to violence among his peers.

The Youth parole board in Victoria argues that all these are considerations given during the decision making process of granting parole. A cursory review of their own annual report indicates that 73 out of 210 paroles were cancelled. A simplistic analysis of this would suggest that the parole boards are only getting it right 2 out of 3 times.

In closing

We recognising that Society is a progressive ‘beast’ and we must continue to move forward and adapt to its ongoing change. However, most critically we need to ensure that we are not swept up in the pace change and lose our grip on the elements of our past that are important.

We must figure out a way to claw back the values and respect of our past whilst still moving forward.

In the simplest statement of this submission **bring back good old fashioned values and decency.**

Prepared by

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On behalf of

VOICES AGAINST VIOLENCE

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