

YACVic's submission to the Inquiry into the Impact of Violence on
Young Australians

youthaffairs
COUNCIL OF VICTORIA INC.



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Acknowledgements

In submitting to this Inquiry, YACVic will be drawing from two submissions that have been made to previous Victorian Parliamentary Committee Inquiries and would like to acknowledge the other organisations who co-authored those submissions with YACVic. They are the Centre for Multicultural Youth, the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare and the Youth Referral and Independent Persons Program.

Youth Affairs Council of Victoria

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) is the peak body representing the youth sector in Victoria. YACVic provides a means through which the youth sector and young people voice their opinions and concerns in regards to policy issues affecting them. YACVic works with and makes representations to government and serves as an advocate for the interests of young people, workers with young people and organisations that provide direct services to young people. YACVic also promotes and supports the participation of young people in debate and policy development areas that most affect them. YACVic's resources are primarily directed towards policy analysis and development, research and consultation and to meeting the information, networking, education and training needs of our constituency.

Introduction

Just as young people are not a homogenous group, their experiences of violence are varied and complex and influenced by a range of factors such as gender, racism, homelessness, cultural perceptions of masculinity, to name a few. This submission will draw on research to highlight the vulnerability of particular groups of young people to violence, with a focus on:

- young women,
- young people with a disability,
- young people who are homeless,

- Indigenous young people,
- young people from refugee or migrant backgrounds,
- young people who are same-sex attracted.

YACVic made a submission with the Centre for Multicultural Youth last month to the Victorian Parliamentary Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee Inquiry into Strategies to Reduce Crimes against the Person, much of which has relevance to this inquiry. As such excerpts from that submission appear reproduced where indicated.

YACVic also co-authored a submission with the Centre for Multicultural Youth, the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare and the Youth Referral and Independent Persons Program, to that same Parliamentary Committee in September 2008 in response to their Inquiry into Strategies to Prevent High Volume offending by young people. That submission is drawn on in discussion around strategies to reduce violence and its impact among young Australians.

This submission will also draw from a recent YACVic policy report *Sticks and Stones and mobile phones: Bullying in the New Millennium*⁷. The report was produced following a YACVic policy forum hosted earlier this year and informs the section of this submission exploring relationships between bullying and the wellbeing of young Australians.

YACVic's submission will give comment on:

- Violence and young people: perceptions and realities.
- The relationship between bullying and the wellbeing of young Australians.
- Social and economic factors that contribute to violence by young Australians.
- Strategies to reduce violence and its impact among young Australians.

Violence and young people: perceptions and realities.

While YACVic acknowledges the importance of people 'feeling' safe, it is critical that policy and programmatic responses to reduce violence are based on evidence rather than on perceptions of violence.

The reality of violence experienced by young people can be quite different from commonly held perceptions. While mainstream perceptions of violence may be focused on young men and alcohol use in public places, the reality is much more complex. Evidence suggests that there are specific concerns and vulnerabilities relating to safety experienced by young women, young people with a disability, young people who are homeless, Indigenous young people, young people from refugee or migrant backgrounds and same-sex attracted young people.

How do young people feel about their safety?

Research tells us that it is common for young people to hold concerns about their safety in certain circumstances. The October 2009 report, the *State of Australia's Young People: A report on the social, economic, health and family lives of young people* released by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, reveals that:

'(a)bout one quarter of young people 18-24 years state that they feel unsafe or very unsafe when walking alone in their local area after dark. In addition about 10 per cent of young people 18-24 years feel unsafe in their homes at night...A number of these young people felt unsafe walking around their neighbourhoods at night...'¹

Gender is a key determinant in how safe a young person may feel. The report goes on to explain that:

¹ Muir, K., Mullan, K., Powell, A., Flaxman, S., Thompson, D., Griffiths, M. (2009) *State of Australia's Young People: A report on the social, economic, health and family lives of young people*. p.115.

‘The single largest demographic factor associated with feeling unsafe is gender. Women are significantly more likely to feel unsafe walking home at night in their local area and feel unsafe at home at night. Mission Australia (2008) also found that women aged 11 – 24 years were more concerned about physical abuse than young men. Indeed, females are more likely to be the victim of sexual crimes like rape. This is likely to have a strong bearing on the extent to which young women feel safe.’²

The report also tells us that young people with a disability are also more likely to hold concerns about their safety:

‘The General Social Survey (2006) shows that young people aged 18-24 with a disability are also more likely to feel unsafe at home at night. This is understandable considering young people with a disability are more likely to have been the victim of violent crime, and it raises critical questions about the safety and security of young people with a disability.’³

The report also explores the issue of trust, as a factor influencing young people’s perceptions of safety and draws from a 2006 survey to tell us that ‘around 30 per cent of young people aged 18-24 years stated that ‘in general people cannot be trusted.’⁴ The report qualifies that that figure is similar amongst adults. Other survey results highlighted in the report of note are:

- Young people 18-24 with a disability are significantly more likely to be distrustful of people in general;

² Muir, K., Mullan, K., Powell, A., Flaxman, S., Thompson, D., Griffiths, M. (2009). *op.cit.* p.116

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

- Distrust of police is higher among young people compared to the broader population, with about 15 per cent of young people 18 to 24 years stating that the police couldn't be trusted.
- Young men and young people with a disability were more likely to distrust the police.

Interestingly the report also drew a link between young people with a disability, illicit drug use, experiences of violence and distrust:

'Young people with disabilities were also found to be significantly more likely to use illicit drugs. This suggests a complicated nexus for young people 18-24 years with disability of feelings of being unsafe, distrustful, being more likely to be the victim of violent crime and more likely to be using illicit drugs. It is likely that mental health problems are an important factor here.'⁵

This data touches on the complex array of factors that influence perceptions of safety, ranging from culturally ingrained influences to circumstantial and experiential parts of a young person's life. The *State of Australia's Young People* explains that:

'The general level of crime in society, along with the extent to which young people are personally exposed to bullying, racism or other forms of discrimination, are central factors that determine how safe individuals feel. The extent to which people feel safe in society is important in terms of their quality of life and general well-being. Fabiansson (2007) found that perceptions of safety are strongly affected by the media, even when they live in a relatively safe location with strong community cohesion.'⁶

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Muir, K., Mullan, K., Powell, A., Flaxman, S., Thompson, D., Griffiths, M. (2009). *op.cit.* p.115.

The media regularly suggests that young people are both unsafe and more often than not, a reason for others to feel unsafe.

Representations in the media and perceptions of young people as violent

The following information first appeared in a submission that YACVic and CMY made in November 2009 to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Strategies to Reduce Crimes against the Person:

Images of young people as a violent threat and as anti-social are perpetuated through the media. Australian research conducted ten years ago on young people and the media concluded that '(t)he dominant issue to which young people are linked in the media is crime, and the role in which they are cast is frequently that of the criminal, especially young men.'⁷ Recent newspaper headlines that appeared in the Victorian press would suggest that this is still the case. The following are just a few examples:

- *Kids riddled with booze and drugs: Pre-teens hooked on heroin*⁸
- *Police vow to be tough as schoolies run amok: Teen jobs face jail*⁹
- *Gangs, alcohol fuel another weekend of violence: Fear on our streets*¹⁰
- *Blood flows as the madness goes on: Youths battle in streets*¹¹
- *Crackdown on youth gangs brings peace to streets*¹²

The 2003 YACVic policy paper, *In the Spotlight: Young people and the media* highlighted the link between media portrayal of young people as criminal and community perceptions about young people as a threat to the safety of others:

⁷ Bessant, J., Sercombe, H. & Watts, R. (1998) 'Youth and the media' in *Youth Studies: An Australian Perspective*, (Melbourne, Longman). p. 137.

⁸ McArthur, G. 'Kids riddled with booze and drugs: Pre-teens hooked on heroin.' Herald Sun, 23/10/09 p.2

⁹ Flower, W. 'Police vow to be tough as schoolies run amok: Teen jobs face jail.' Herald Sun, 26/11/09 p. 19.

¹⁰ Hastie, D. 'Gangs, alcohol fuel another weekend of violence: Fear on our streets.' Herald Sun, 25/02/08 p. 4.

¹¹ Johnston, M., Roberts, B. & Mitchell, G. *Blood flows as the madness goes on: Youths battle in streets.* Herald Sun, 15/4/09.

¹² Andreson, P. 'Crackdown on youth gangs brings peace to streets.' Herald Sun, 15/4/08.

'The association between young people and crime can significantly influence the way young people are perceived by the wider community and their ability to access public space. For example, community consultations in Melbourne found that the presence of young people, especially in groups, made many people feel unsafe in the city.'¹³

The reality: young people and violence

'The state of Australia's young people' report tells us that 'young people are more likely to become victims of some violent crimes (including rape, other sexual offences and assaults) and are less likely than older victims to report a violent crime.'¹⁴ The report also tells us that, '(i)n a 12 month period, just over 3 per cent of young people aged 14-24 years were the victim of a violent crime.'¹⁵ Victoria Police Crime Statistics for the 2008-09 year show that young people under the age of 18 were 19.3% of victims of offences against the person.¹⁶

In the Victorian context, as Youthlaw first reported to this inquiry in their submission, police statistics for 2008-09 indicate that:

- Youth crime (under 18 years) against the person (homicide, rape, robbery, assault and abduction) is down by 3.3% (following three years of increases)
- Assaults committed by young people are also down 3.7%.

By comparison:

- Adult crimes against the person are have increased by 5.1%, and

¹³ City of Melbourne (2002) Here and now: connecting young people, community and the city of Melbourne, youth strategy 2001-2003. p.13 in Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, *In the Spotlight: Young people and the media* (2003) available for download from <http://www.yacvic.org.au/policy/items/2009/01/259258-upload-00001.pdf>

¹⁴ Muir, K., Mullan, K., Powell, A., Flaxman, S., Thompson, D., Griffiths, M. (2009). *op.cit.* p.114.

¹⁵ Muir, K., Mullan, K., Powell, A., Flaxman, S., Thompson, D., Griffiths, M. (2009). *op.cit.* p.115.

¹⁶ *Victoria Police Crime Statistics 2008/09* Released August 2009, p.18. Available for download from http://www.police.vic.gov.au/content.asp?Document_ID=782

- Assaults committed by adults have increased 7%.¹⁷

The State of Australia's Young People report tells us that youth violent crime is:

- much more likely to be perpetrated by young men than young women;
- likely to be inflicted on young men by someone they don't know in public (three quarters of young men were attacked by a stranger, often in licensed venues or another public place);
- likely to be inflicted on young women by someone they do know in a private space (over 80 per cent of women physically assaulted by a man knew their attacker and were most likely attacked in their own home or the home of someone they knew).

In addition to the data regarding young women's vulnerability to sexual violence and young people with a disability's vulnerability to assault already mentioned, the following groups of young people experience particular vulnerabilities to violence:

The following information first appeared in a submission that YACVic and CMY made in November 2009 to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Strategies to Reduce Crimes against the Person:

Indigenous young people:

The *State of Australia's young people* report draws on ABS data to tell us that Indigenous young people are more likely to be a victim of violence than non-Indigenous young people, 'with one third of 18-24 year old Indigenous people reporting that they had been a victim of physical or threatened violence in the previous 12 months. Key stakeholders also confirmed that young Indigenous people were more likely to be the victims of assault than other young people.'¹⁸

Young people who are homeless:

¹⁷ *Victoria Police Crime Statistics 2008/09* Released August 2009. Available for download from http://www.police.vic.gov.au/content.asp?Document_ID=782

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Young people who are homeless face significant vulnerabilities to violence. Melbourne based research found that almost all homeless males (96%) and three-quarters of homeless females (74%) had experienced physical violence since leaving home. It is worth noting that often these young people had been rendered homeless by violence. Young people who are homeless are also less likely to report their experience of violence to the police.¹⁹

Same-sex attracted young people:*

The La Trobe University report *Writing themselves in again: 6 years on – The 2nd national report on the sexual health and well-being of same sex attracted young people in Australia* recorded a large survey sample of same-sex attracted young people's experiences of verbal and physical abuse related to sexuality and found that:

'In 2004, almost half (44%) reported having been verbally abused (compared with 46% in 1998), and 15% reported physical abuse (compared with 13% in 1998). More young men than young women reported verbal (46% males vs 43% females) and physical abuse (19% males vs 9% females).'²⁰

In relation to physical abuse the report tells us that:

'...the abuse ranged from having clothes and possessions ruined, to severe bashings, rape and hospitalization. The type of abusers ranged from family members to fellow students and strangers...The most common context for abuse was the school... (and) of the young people who were

¹⁹ Adler (1990) cited in Halstead, B. (1992) *Young people as victims of violence*. (Hobart, National Clearinghouse for Young Studies).

²⁰ Hillier, L., Turner, A., & Mitchell, A. (2005) *Writing themselves in again: 6 years on. The second national report on the sexuality, health and well-being of same sex attracted young people in Australia*. Australian Centre in Sex, Health & Society, (Melbourne, La Trobe University), p. 37

* Please note that YACVic uses the term 'same-sex attracted' young people to include gay, lesbian, transgender, intersex and queer youth.

abused, 46% experienced abuse in public places in the community.²¹

Refugee and Migrant Young People:

In many parts of Melbourne, young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds express a great deal of concern regarding violence directed towards them. In working with these young people, the Centre for Multicultural Youth has found that violence is a major fear in their communities, particularly where it is a result of racism. Australian-Sudanese young people in particular have expressed fears that they may be attacked because of assumptions in some communities that these young people are dangerous or are in gangs.²²

The relationship between bullying, violence and the wellbeing of young Australians.

Bullying is itself an act of violence. It is widely experienced by young people in a range of contexts and had serious, at times detrimental impacts on their wellbeing. In November 2009, YACVic released the report *Sticks and Stones and Mobile Phones: Bullying in the New Millennium: Outcomes of a forum on bullying and young people in Victoria*. The following information has been drawn from that report, to explore the relationship between bullying as a form of violence and the wellbeing of young people. A copy of the report accompanies this submission as an appendix.

YACVic hosted *Sticks and Stones and Mobile Phones* at the Melbourne Town Hall in August this year, in response to increasing concern in the community and amongst youth services about the prevalence and impact of bullying in all its forms, on young people in

²¹ Hillier, L., Turner, A., & Mitchell, A. (2005) *Writing themselves in again: 6 years on. The second national report on the sexuality, health and well-being of same sex attracted young people in Australia*. Australian Centre in Sex, Health & Society, (Melbourne, La Trobe University), p. 38-39.

²² Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (2008) *Rights of Passage: The Experiences of Australian-Sudanese young people*, see: <http://www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au/publications/reports%20and%20discussion%20papers/> accessed 19/10/2009

Victoria. The forum brought together experts in research, representatives from relevant government departments, youth service providers, principals/teachers and young people themselves.

The forum featured a keynote presentation, *Bullying and Peer Relationships: What We Need to Know* by Dr. Barbara Spears, Senior Lecturer in the School of Education, University of South Australia. It also involved presentations from a panel of experts on bullying experienced by young people in the following areas:

- in the school setting;
- on-line;
- in the workplace;
- in sport;
- bullying experienced by young people with a disability, and
- bullying experienced by same-sex attracted young people.

Dr. Spears shared some trends in the data collected by Professor Donna Cross for the *Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study*. The Study revealed that 23.2% of the Victorian students who engaged with the comprehensive survey reported being bullied.

Bullying at school and cyber bullying:

The prevalence data tells us that bullying at school is still the most commonly experienced form of bullying. In Victoria 6% of students reported that they had experienced cyber-bullying. Dr. Spears highlighted the importance of programs or strategies to reduce cyber-bullying that revolve around supporting the development of young people as competent cyber-citizens, promoting cyber literacy and socially responsible behaviour in the use of digital technology.

Bullying experienced by same-sex attracted young people:

In the panel session, the forum heard Dr. Lynne Hillier describe the prevalence and serious consequences of bullying experienced by young people who are same-sex attracted. Dr. Hillier co-authored the 1998 research report *Writing themselves in: A National Report in the Sexuality, Health and Well-Being of Same-Sex Attracted Young People*' and the follow up 2005 report *Writing themselves in Again: 6 years on*. She reported that 35% of the young people surveyed in the collection of data from the second report had said they had self-harmed as a result of homophobic bullying.²³

Bullying in the workplace:

Danielle Archer, from the Young Unionist Network raised concerns at the forum that workplace bullying is often readily accepted and in some workplaces a culture of bullying was 'institutionalised'. She described workplace bullying as an Occupational Health and Safety concern and reminded the audience of young people's vulnerability to it and of the under-reporting of bullying in the workplace.

Bullying experienced by young people with a disability:

Dr. George Taleporos, Coordinator of the youth Disability Advocacy Service raised serious concerns at the forum regarding the prevalence of bullying experienced by young people with a disability. In the absence of Australian specific data, George shared statistics from the UK that approximately 80% of students with an intellectual disability reported experiencing bullying. Disturbingly, George also described a common experience for parents of children with a disability in feeling bullied within the school system themselves.

Bullying in Sport:

²³ Hillier, L., Turner, A., & Mitchell, A. (2005) *Writing themselves in again: 6 years on. The second national report on the sexuality, health and well-being of same-sex-attracted young people in Australia*. Australian Centre in Sex, Health & Society, La Trobe University. Melbourne.

The multi-levelled ways in which bullying occurs in sport was discussed at the forum. Bullying in Sport occurs between peers, perpetuated by coaches or by parents and spectators of a game or can be ingrained in a structural way within a club.

The relationship between racism, bullying and assaults

The following information first appeared in a November 2009 submission that YACVic and CMY made to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Strategies to Reduce Crimes against the Person.

The sector is aware that there is a causal link between bullying and retaliatory violence, which can quickly escalate out of control. Pervasive and overtly racist bullying against young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds is widespread in certain areas of Melbourne, with young refugees subjected to verbal and/or physical attacks, who then retaliate in a similar fashion. These experiences affirm the findings of longitudinal research undertaken by the La Trobe Refugee Research Centre, which reported that racist bullying is a major cause of violence.²⁴ According to the research based on the experiences of 88 young people aged 12 to 20 years of age from refugee backgrounds:²⁵

- 42% of young people reported experiencing racism because of their ethnicity, religion or colour, by their second year in Australia.
- 9% of young people experienced discrimination in their first year at school in Australia, which increased to 20% at school in the second year;
- 12% of youth experienced discrimination on the street or in public settings;
- 13% of young people experienced discrimination from police since arriving in Australia;
- 21% of young people experienced discrimination in public places since arriving in Australia, especially on trains and in shops.

²⁴ Refugee Health Research Centre (2007), GOODSTARTS for Refugee Youth, Broadsheet #4, November.

²⁵ *ibid*

Anecdotal evidence also describes the all too common experience of racism for Indigenous young people. The report *VIYAC Voices telling it like it is: Young Aboriginal Victorians on Culture, Identity and Racism* contains oral evidence such as this, offered by a 24 year old Yorta Yorta man: “Racism is everywhere you look. It’s everywhere. It’s in the ‘You’re doing really well for one of those’. It’s the stigma associated with walking into the supermarket with my cousins. Like, I can walk into a supermarket and do my shopping by myself or with my mainstream mates, very comfortably – I walk in with a couple of cousins, and we’re followed.”²⁶

Social and economic factors that contribute to violence by young Australians

Already in this submission, YACVic has drawn the Committee’s attention to the way in which particular groups of young people in the community experience particular vulnerabilities to violence, based on gender, disability, if they are Indigenous or experiencing homelessness. YACVic asserts that this reflects structural societal factors such as discrimination on the basis of gender or race. Alongside these structural concerns and also impacting on the incidence of violence in Australia are cultural frames of masculinity that support the use of violence and a cultural acceptance of violence in some sport.

Cultural acceptance of violence

The following information first appeared in the November 2009 YACVic, CMY submission made to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Strategies to Reduce Crimes Against the Person.

Consideration needs to be given to the influence of cultural frames of masculinity and cultural acceptance of violence that are prevalent in Australian society. The ‘typical Australian male’ is often portrayed as ‘tough’ and ‘unemotional’. Men can struggle in this culture to find ways to resolve anger productively or to communicate effectively about their feelings.

²⁶ Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council & Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (2005). *VIYAC Voices Telling it Like it is: Young Aboriginal Victorians on Culture, Identity and Racism*. (Melbourne, VIYAC & YACVic). p.28.

There is a cultural acceptance of violence and almost a glorification of it, in some popular sports in Australia. In *Sticks and Stones and Mobile Phones*, YACVic reported on discussions between forum participants who noted ‘the cultivation of aggressive behaviors sometimes encouraged in sport’²⁷ as a factor that made it difficult to identify and address bullying in sport.

To create lasting meaningful change, strategies to reduce violence and the occurrence of assault need to consider the cultural perceptions of masculinity and the acceptance of violence in mainstream culture as displayed through some sports.

Strategies to reduce violence and its impact on young Australians

Strategies to reduce violence and its impact on young Australians need to reflect young people’s diverse experiences of violence, including, but extending beyond alcohol related violence in public places. These strategies need to focus on address the causes behind the vulnerability of some groups of young people to violence. They need also to engage young people themselves in the development of solutions.

Community organisations and youth services play a critical role in reducing the incidence of violence in the community. They play a critical role by providing early intervention, generalist supports to young people, they also provide specialist support to particular groups of more ‘vulnerable’ young people and they can also roll-out very specific interventions to reduce violence and assault. The organisation Step Back Think ‘seeks to represent Melbourne's youth as a voice of unity against street violence’ and are developing

²⁷ Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (2009). *Sticks and Stones and Mobile Phones Bullying in the New Millennium: Outcomes of a forum on bullying and young people in Victoria*. (Melbourne, Youth Affairs Council of Victoria). p.40.

a range of community focussed initiatives including a Pilot Education program targeting years 9 and 10 students.²⁸

In the case of strategies to reduce young people offending violent crimes, YACVic recommends that all programmatic responses be guided by the following principles:

- Early and non-stigmatic intervention;
- Build up young people's 'protective factors';
- Promote a sense of connectedness;
- Keep young people outside the justice system as far as possible.

YACVic have also made a number of recommendations specific to reducing bullying in the report *Sticks and Stones and Mobile Phones: Bullying in the New Millennium* which has been submitted to the inquiry as an attachment to this report.

²⁸ For further information on Step Back Think see their website <http://stepbackthink.org> accessed 13/10/09.