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Committee on Family, Community, Housing
and Youth**

**Inquiry into the impact of violence on young
Australians**

Submission from the Australian Institute of Family Studies

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House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth Inquiry Into the Impact of Violence on Young Australians

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The Australian Institute of Family Studies is pleased to have the opportunity to make a submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth, Inquiry Into the Impact of Violence on Young Australians.

In this submission, we respond to all terms of reference by drawing on a range of relevant studies and resources produced by the Institute. At times we also draw on other resources to further demonstrate the impact violence may have on young people in Australia.

Young people, and especially young men, are particularly vulnerable to violence, both as perpetrators and victims. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) *Personal Safety Survey Australia* of 2005 indicated that 12% of women and 34% of men aged 18–24 years old reported at least one incident of violence in the 12 months prior to the survey, compared to 6.5% of women and 9.4% of men aged 35–44 years of age (ABS, 2005). Violence does not occur in a vacuum and a wide range of factors may increase the risk of youth violence, including individual factors (e.g., attention problems, impulsiveness and hyperactivity), the influence of family and peers (history of maltreatment or a breakdown in family relationships) and the impact of social and cultural factors (poverty and housing instability).

Understanding the key causes of violence and the way in which violence is perceived in the community can assist in improving strategies to prevent future violence among young Australians.

Reference 1: Perceptions of violence and community safety among young Australians

Research examining the way in which young people perceive violence in the community is limited in Australia; however, the research that is available indicates that it is a significant concern for many young Australians. In the National Survey of Young Australians 2008, which surveyed 45,558 young people aged 11 to 24 years of age, just over one-fifth identified that personal safety and physical/sexual abuse were significant concerns (Mission Australia, 2008). A quarter of participants also indicated that family conflict and drug abuse were of concern.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies collaborated with Crime Prevention Victoria to analyse adolescent self-reports of their involvement in anti-social behaviour, using data from the Australian Temperament Project (ATP). The Australian Temperament Project is an ongoing longitudinal study managed by the Institute, which has followed the progress of a large group of Victorian children from infancy to 20 years of age. The report, titled *Patterns of Antisocial Behaviour From Early to Late Adolescence*, was based on surveys at the ages of 13–14 years, 15–16 years and 17–18 years (Smart, Vassallo, Sanson, & Dussuyer, 2004). Findings indicated that approximately half of the adolescents in the study reported involvement in some form of antisocial behaviour during the previous 12 months. However, engagement in more “serious” acts—for example assault with the intent of serious injury—were rare. Male adolescents more often engaged in almost all types of antisocial acts than females, and violent behaviour was much more prevalent among males. The authors highlighted that it is important to measure adolescents’ own reports of involvement in antisocial behaviour, as such behaviour is not always reported

to police and self-reported measures allow questions to be answered regarding the degree to which such behaviour results in criminal justice contact.

In the Australian Temperament Project's latest survey wave (Wave 14, 2006–07), which interviewed over one thousand young adults aged 23–24 years of age, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences growing up (prior to 18), and for the first time they were asked a series of questions relating to their experience of child maltreatment. Six per cent of the sample had experienced physical abuse, 2.8% had experienced neglect, 18.1% had experienced emotional abuse, and 4.4% had witnessed family violence. In addition, 5% of males and 6.5% of females had experienced sexual abuse. Due to sample attrition, the participants in these studies were slightly more likely to be of higher than average socio-economic status (e.g., higher levels of education and employment). This may have led to an under-representation of those most at risk of abuse and neglect. However, findings still indicated that child abuse and neglect is a significant problem in Australia.

In relation to young people's attitudes to sexual violence, recent results of a survey of university students on the Central Coast, New South Wales, indicated that 71% of respondents knew someone who had been sexually assaulted (Bourasnell, Lee, & Chung, 2008). Respondents were also asked questions on what constituted sexual assault, and 50% identified that anything "unwanted" could be categorised as sexual assault, including "unwanted touching", "doing things that are unwanted" and "unwanted sexual advances". The findings challenge the notion that when most people think of "sexual assault" they think of rape by a stranger. The authors concluded that there is an urgent need to highlight the complexities of sexual assault within our communities, and the extent of sexual assault by persons known to the victim.

Further large-scale quantitative research on the perception of violence among young people is needed in Australia, particularly in relation to what young people view as being important in reducing youth violence in the community.

Reference 2: Links between illicit drug use, alcohol abuse and violence among young Australians

Research has consistently identified strong associations between drug and alcohol abuse and violent behaviour. Alcohol and drug abuse may increase the likelihood of young people engaging in violent and criminal behaviour; however, it may also increase the likelihood of young people being victims of violence, either between peers or in the family home.

Alcohol abuse can seriously affect parenting, which may increase the risk of domestic violence and physical abuse on children. The National Child Protection Clearinghouse Issues Paper 29, *Improving Outcomes for Children Living With Families With Parental Substance Misuse: What Do We Know and What Should We Do?*, explores how children are affected in families with multiple problems, including parental substance abuse (Dawe, Harnett, & Frye, 2008). The authors argued that to achieve organisational change, accurate mechanisms for estimating the extent of the problem of parental substance abuse and child abuse and neglect, and policies that include a focus on children and families within the drug and alcohol field need to be established.

One aspect of the link between alcohol and violence against young people is the issue of drink spiking. The problem with media representations of drink spiking is that they tend to ignore the realities of typical experiences of sexual assaults that occur in the context of heavy alcohol consumption (Neame, 2003). Neame examined some key issues in the debate and focused in particular on how media misrepresentations of the phenomenon of alcohol-induced sexual assault has led to traditional victim-blaming stereotypes. The paper also highlighted statistics from the New South Wales Department of Health, which showed that 21.4% of people presenting to the Eastern and Central Sexual Assault Service

(ECAS) during the year 2000 reported that drug-use was associated with their experience of assault (Neame, 2003).

Alcohol and drug use affects cognitive and physical functioning. In an intoxicated state of mind, rational decision-making is often compromised, leading to less self-control and an inability to assess risks. In such a state, certain drinkers are more likely to resort to violence in times of conflict or confrontation. On the other hand, intoxication that reduces physical control and the ability to recognise dangerous situations can make some people easy targets for perpetrators. In the ABS (2005) *Personal Safety Survey Australia*, 79% of the 18–24 year old men who identified as having been physically assaulted said that the perpetrators had been drinking or taking drugs. Just over one-third (34%) also said that they themselves had been drinking or taking drugs.

Reference 3: The relationship between bullying and violence and the wellbeing of young Australians

Bullying, which can take the form of physical violence, is another significant social problem in Australia. In a briefing paper entitled *Working With Families Concerned With School-Based Bullying*, Lodge (2008) outlined some of the key issues around school-based bullying, with a focus on what families can do; in particular, what agencies and therapists who work with families can do to assist them. In the following paragraphs, we provide a brief overview of these issues.

School bullying is a particular form of aggressive behaviour that typically involves a power imbalance and deliberate acts of harm, which may be physical, emotional and/or psychological. Longitudinal studies highlight bullying as being a significant factor in lowered health and wellbeing, including physical and somatic symptoms, anxiety, social dysfunction and depression, school failure and substance use. Both boys and girls can be victims and/or bullies, with boys tending to bully in ways that are more physical and girls in ways that are more emotional or indirect (Lodge, 2008).

Children who bully are more likely to come from families where parenting is both “authoritarian” and inconsistent. (According to Diana Baumrind, who developed a typology of parenting that is well accepted and frequently cited in the literature, *authoritarian* parents are highly demanding and directive, but not responsive.¹) The pattern of bullying may continue into later life and has been linked to domestic violence and a greater likelihood of criminal convictions and aggressive behaviour in general.

Support from family, the nature of family dynamics and the ability to appropriately resolve conflict in the family are crucial factors in determining a young person’s involvement in bully–victim situations. Encouraging responsive and responsible “authoritative” parenting will reduce the risk of young people becoming involved in school bullying problems, but also increase their ability to handle problems that may arise. (*Authoritative* parents are both demanding and responsive—setting clear standards, monitoring children’s behaviour, but using disciplinary methods that are supportive, rather than punitive.) Interactions with siblings are also important, as these interactions can influence relationship styles. Parents may inadvertently support bullying by not intervening when siblings fight (Lodge, 2008).

Specific connections between child abuse/neglect and bullying have rarely been examined in Australia. In relation to perpetrators of bullying, there is no single path that will lead a child into bullying others; however, several risk factors can be identified that may increase the likelihood of bullying behaviour. Although experiences of child abuse or neglect by a caregiver in the family home is considered a key risk

¹ See: <www.thehealth.com/Practitioner/ceduc/parentingstyles.html#Baumrind91>.

factor for bullying behaviour, other risk factors include race or religious differences and other prejudices (Lodge, 2008).

In experiencing abuse or neglect in the family home, studies have shown that children are much more likely to develop behavioural problems and cognitive delays, yet research into whether such problems have a relationship with bullying are rare. The studies that are available highlight that children who have been maltreated are much more likely to be either perpetrators and/or victims of bullying than non-maltreated children. For example, Shields and Cicchetti (2001) examined the likelihood of bullying on a sample of 169 maltreated children and 98 non-maltreated children. They found that bullying was much more prevalent among children who experienced physical or sexual abuse. Research studies have identified that children who witness or experience physical violence in the home are more likely to imitate that behaviour in other environments. A US study by Dussich and Maekoya (2007) found that there are significant relationships between physical child harm and three types of bullying: (a) offending; (b) being victimised; and (c) both offending and being victimised. Shields and Cicchetti also found that maltreatment placed children at greater risk for victimisation, highlighting that child maltreatment by caregivers could severely affect a child's ability to relate to their peers. Although the limited research literature identifies a key link between experiences of child maltreatment and bullying, it cannot be assumed that all perpetrators have been victims of child abuse or neglect.

The National Child Protection Clearinghouse has an online bibliography on bullying and violence, which can be accessed at <www.aifs.gov.au/nch/bib/bully.html>.

Reference 4: Social and economic factors that contribute to violence by young Australians

Although there is limited research regarding the effect of socio-economic status on youth aggression and violence, broader research does suggest that there is a wide range of other life experiences and family circumstances—both risk and protective factors—that affect a young person's vulnerability to violence. The impact of exposure to violence among young people can vary considerably. A risk factor matrix developed by Communities that Care highlights how factors such as extreme economic deprivation, low neighbourhood attachment, community disorganisation, family conflict, availability of drugs, lack of commitment to school and a family history of the problem behaviour may increase the risk of youth violence. For a full table of the risk matrix go to:

<download.ncadi.samhsa.gov/Prevline/pdfs/ctc/RiskFactorsMatrix.pdf>.

Protective factors can protect against young people being exposed to violence, which may include individual attributes, such as self-esteem and independence, a supportive family and friends, and a strong community.

Experiencing child abuse and neglect may lead to a wide range of adverse consequences for children and young people, including serious physical injuries and illnesses, psychological problems such as depression and anxiety disorders, and substance abuse problems. Children and young people exposed to domestic violence or child physical abuse have also been shown to be at risk of violent and criminal activity, as they have learned that such behaviour is an appropriate method for responding to stress or conflict resolution. Some of the key risk factors that may increase the likelihood of children being exposed to physical abuse and domestic violence include family conflict/partner violence, parental mental illness or drug use, poverty, dangerous neighbourhoods, social isolation, large families and unemployment. Specific types of abuse are more closely related to some adverse outcomes than others; for example, physical abuse and violent or aggressive behaviour and experiencing chronic and multiple forms of abuse increases the risk of more damaging and severe consequences for children and young people.

Reference 5: Strategies to reduce violence and its impact among young Australians

There is a variety of approaches to preventing violent and aggressive behaviour among young people. We have examined a range of resources at the Australian Institute of Family Studies that relate to prevention strategies in a variety of contexts. Prevention programs are commonly classified into three main levels: primary, secondary and tertiary. Primary prevention is targeted at the general community, aiming to promote healthy relationships. Secondary prevention targets at-risk groups and individuals such as young people who have experienced violence in the family home. Tertiary prevention involves those who have already experienced violence, including counselling programs, statutory interventions and perpetrator groups (Holzer, 2007).

Intervening early to prevent problem behaviours developing or progressing is the best way to prevent youth violence. Prevention strategies that target young adolescents are crucial, as this is a time when young people risk moving into “harmful pathways” that might be destructive to themselves and their relationships.

In report on what works and what doesn't work in the prevention of violence in the community, Homel (1999) summarised several key points from the research literature on how to prevent violence in different circumstances. These are discussed below.

Violence in licensed venues

The report found that violence could be reduced or prevented through the following strategies:

- the responsible service of alcohol and changing the physical design of venues, which could reduce violence, as could the management of venues and hours of operation;
- targeted policing, such as random checks on licensed premises; and
- community involvement through consultation and involvement in solutions for alcohol-related violence.

Violence on public transport

The fear of becoming a victim of violence while travelling on our trains, buses and ferries is greater than the actual risk of being assaulted. However fear of crime and the view that our public transport system is not safe is a significant issue. The report recommended:

- reducing the opportunities for crime to occur through the design of stations (e.g., with the installation of CCTV, additional lighting, etc.);
- increasing the use of transport, which can reduce violence and increase feelings of safety; and
- addressing the fear of crime, which could be a means of increasing patronage of the public transport system, which in turn could act as a deterrent to violence.

School violence

The most common form of violence at schools takes the form of bullying. Homel (1999) also recommended that:

- programs to prevent bullying should not just focus on the individual and their behaviour, but address the school environment more generally, particularly the way classes, disruptions, and behaviour are managed; and
- connections with the surrounding community are also important, such as by connecting with families, and providing infrastructure and opportunities (e.g., recreational facilities).

Aboriginal communities

The report found:

- there are significant differences in the issues facing urban, rural and remote communities and these need to be explored through further research;
- repeat offending needs to be addressed through post-release support services;
- the most successful programs are those planned and operated by Aboriginal people; and
- governments and service providers need to support what Aboriginal communities decide to do to address their problems, rather than prescribing the remedies.

Domestic violence

Hemel (1999) reported that:

- criminal sanctions alone were not enough to prevent domestic violence re-occurring;
- programs for perpetrators of domestic violence are a promising development, but need to be evaluated to determine effectiveness;
- a need for more research on the prevention of domestic violence involving specific groups, such as gay men and lesbians, women from a non-English speaking background and women with disabilities; and
- a need for programs for children who have been witnesses to domestic violence.

For further details of the Hemel (1999) report, go to:

<www.griffith.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0007/82627/preventing.pdf>.

Although numerous prevention strategies have been implemented in Australia, very few prevention programs have undertaken formal evaluations. More comprehensive evaluation is therefore needed that can identify aspects of programs that bring about change in the lives of young people. For further details on program evaluation in the child welfare sector, see the National Child Protection Clearinghouse Resource Sheet, *Evaluating Child Abuse and Neglect Intervention Programs* (Lamont, in press).

The National Child Protection Clearinghouse Issues Paper 24, *The Effectiveness of Parent Education and Home Visiting Maltreatment Prevention Programs*, provides an overview of different types of prevention programs in the child welfare context and discusses the effectiveness of certain parent education and home visiting programs (Holzer, Higgins, Bromfield, Richardson, & Higgins, 2006). The authors concluded that the most effective parent education programs were programs containing targeted recruitment; a structured and lengthy program; a combination of interventions/strategies; and a strengths-based approach. Effective home visiting programs were delivered by highly trained professionals; contained targeted recruitment strategies; goals that matched client needs; and were designed to improve both maternal and child wellbeing.

Examples of prevention strategies for reducing youth violence

Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
Improving school settings and after-school programs	Home visitation	Counselling
General awareness media campaigns	Parent education programs	Statutory interventions
Bully prevention programs in schools	Family therapy	Extensive therapeutic services
Strengthening and improving police and judicial systems	Mentoring programs	Gang prevention programs
Public information campaigns	Peer mediation/peer counselling	Intensive community interventions
Improving emergency response, trauma care and access to health service	Incentives for youth at high risk to complete school	

Conclusion

In this submission, we have drawn attention to some research data and resources held at the Institute about the impact of violence on young Australians, attitudes towards violence in the community and the relationship between violence and child maltreatment. The research shows that although violence among young people is a frequent occurrence, there are several prevention strategies available to assist in preventing future violence and for supporting young people who may have experienced violence, either in by family, peers or those known to the young person as well as from strangers in public places.

References

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- Dussich, J., & Maekoya, C. (2007). Physical child harm and bullying-related behaviours: A comparative study in Japan, South Africa and the United States. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 51(5), 495–509.
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Additional resources and extended bibliography

A number of useful links (particularly about the relationships between child protection issues and violence) can be found on the National Child Protection Clearinghouse website:

www.aifs.gov.au/nch/resources/links/links.html.

Other useful resources from the National Child Protection Clearinghouse

Boyd, C., & Bromfield, L. (2006). *Young people who sexually abuse: Key issues* (Practice Brief No. 1). Melbourne: National Child Protection Clearinghouse. Retrieved 28 October 2009, from www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/brief/pb1/pb1.html.

This paper is about young people who have committed acts of sexual abuse. It is written for those who might come across this issue in their day-to-day work and would like to know what the current research and practice says about understanding and responding to this group of young people.

Mullen, P., & Fleming, J. (1998). Long-term effects of child sexual abuse. (Issues No. 9). Melbourne: National Child Protection Clearinghouse. Retrieved 28 October 2009, from www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/issues/issues9/issues9.html.

This article examines the impact of child sexual abuse on social, sexual and interpersonal functioning, and its potential role in mediating the more widely recognised impacts on mental health. In discussing the relationship between child sexual abuse and adult psychopathology, the authors evaluate a number of models, including the post-traumatic stress disorder model, the traumatogenic model, and developmental and social models. They look at family risk factors which predispose children from specific population groups to be at greater risk of abuse, and conclude that the fundamental damage caused by child sexual abuse impacts on the child's developing capacities for trust, intimacy, agency and sexuality.

Australian resource links

Bullying in Schools www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying The Bullying in Schools is a site, which provides information on available resources concerned with bullying in schools in Australia. The purpose of these pages is to provide information that will help people to understand more about bullying in schools and how it can be stopped. It is of special interest to educators, children and parents.

Youth In Search www.youthinsearch.org.au is a recognised charity, non-government community volunteer organisation that works with young people aged 12–17 years of age.

Headspace www.headspace.org.au/about provides mental and health support, information and services for young people and their families across Australia.

Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies www.acys.info aims to support youth organisations, youth workers, youth researchers and young people themselves, as well as policymakers, researchers and practitioners in other sectors working with youth.

International links

New Zealand campaign and website *No Bully* www.nobully.org.nz/kids.htm is part of the Telecom/Police Stop Bullying Campaign. The site provides information about support services in the community and ways that adults can help kids to deal with bullying.

Other relevant studies

We also draw the Committee's attention to the following studies relevant to the impact of violence on young Australians:

- Chan, C. (2005). *Alcohol issues in domestic violence* (Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse Topic Paper). Retrieved 28 October 2009, from <www.austdvclearinghouse.unsw.edu.au/PDF/files/Alcohol_Issues.pdf>.
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