

SECTION ONE

INTRODUCTION

In April 1993 the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, the Hon Virginia Chadwick, MLC, requested that the Standing Committee on Social Issues inquire into youth violence in New South Wales.

In determining the most appropriate way to inquire into an issue of such complexity and sensitivity, the Committee felt there was a need, in the first instance, to gain an understanding of the current situation. The Committee sought answers to some fundamental questions such as:

- how extensive is youth violence?
- what policies and programs does the government already have in place to address the issue?
- what factors impact upon the violence committed by and against youth?
- what does the current research have to say?

To answer these and other important background questions, the Committee, with the Minister's approval, sought assistance from the Office of Youth Affairs. The Office is the agency concerned with government policy, strategies and programs for young people. This document has been prepared with the participation of the Office of Youth Affairs and the cooperation of relevant government agencies.

This Paper is the first step in the inquiry process and addresses the first two Terms of Reference only. To minimise duplication, it lets people know what the Committee already understands about youth violence. It provides a starting point from which those interested in the issue can make written submissions to the Committee.

To avoid any misunderstanding, it should be made clear that this Paper is no more than a basis for gathering further information on youth violence. This Issues Paper therefore:

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- does NOT reflect the views of the Committee or any of its members at this stage
- does NOT express opinions, draw conclusions or make recommendations about any aspect of youth violence
- does NOT analyse or evaluate existing government policies and initiatives addressing youth violence
- does NOT comment on recent incidents of youth violence reported in the media

The Committee will table its report at a later date. Only then will it state its views and make its recommendations.

In carrying out this Inquiry, the Committee in no way encourages the public to conclude that youth are more violent than the rest of the community. In addition, sections of this Issues Paper also draw attention to the fact that youth are frequently victims of violence.

AIM

The aim of this Issues Paper is:

- to provide statistical information on the incidence of youth violence in New South Wales
- to identify relevant government policies and programs at both the state and Federal level
- to identify factors related to the incidence of youth violence
- to furnish an extensive bibliography for further research.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this Issues Paper is to provide the basis for written submissions to the Standing Committee on Social Issues and for public hearings to be conducted by the Committee.

METHOD

The information in the Issues Paper has been provided by a range of government agencies, research literature and discussions with youth workers and academics.

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SECTION TWO

DEFINITIONS

2.1 INTRODUCTION

"Youth" and "violence" carry a range of meanings. It is therefore necessary to determine the meaning these key words will have in the course of the current inquiry. This section provides the necessary definitions along with recognition of some of the issues inherent in making these definitions.

2.2 YOUTH

There is no single age-related definition of youth. The criminal justice system distinguishes between "juvenile" offenders who are aged 10 to 17 years inclusive, and "adult" offenders who are aged over 17 years. The Youth Advisory Council Act 1989, which established a Council to advise the New South Wales Government on matters of concern to youth, defines youth as those aged 12 to 24 years inclusive. This definition is also used by the United Nations.

For the purposes of the Inquiry, youth are defined as **those aged 10 to 24 years inclusive**.

Where appropriate, the paper distinguishes between those aged 10 to 17 years inclusive and those aged 18 to 24 years inclusive.

2.3 VIOLENCE

Defining violence is particularly problematic. This is not surprising given the number of components which can make up a definition of violence. These include whether or not the violence:

- is threatened and/or actual
- is planned or spontaneous (as in the difference between murder and manslaughter)

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- is verbal, psychological (for example, deliberately excluding an individual from a group) and/or physical in nature
- is directed at another person and/or at self, and/or at property
- has negative psychological (including emotional) and/or physical effects

It has also been suggested that violence is a social construct to some extent in that value judgments are involved in determining whether some behaviours constitute violence.

For the purposes of this Issues Paper, violence is defined as **threatened or actual, psychological, sexual or physical behaviour by one person directed at another person (or self) resulting in psychological or physical harm to that other person (or self).**

The Standing Committee on Social Issues is currently conducting inquiries into the incidence of sexual violence in New South Wales and suicide in rural communities of the state. Those interested in making submissions on either of these topics (which do not have specific age parameters) are encouraged to contact the Committee and obtain further details.

2.3.1 School Violence

Several incidents of youth violence have recently been reported in the media under the headline of school violence. As well as violence which has been committed by school students on school grounds during school hours, reported incidents have included violence committed:

- by school students outside school hours
- by school students outside school grounds (for example, while travelling to and from school)
- on school grounds by those who are not school students
- by school students wearing school uniform outside school hours and school grounds

When these incidents are referred to as school violence it is likely to lead to a perception that schools are also responsible for addressing these problems. However, there are likely to be differing views about whether schools should be held responsible for such a wide range of incidents.

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SECTION THREE

CONTEXT

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Violence by and against youth does not occur in isolation. Youths are not a homogeneous group, and like the rest of the community their needs vary depending on age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geographic location.

3.2 DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

At the 1991 Census:

- 25% of the New South Wales population (1,295,551) were aged 10-24 years
- 13% of the New South Wales population (670,086) were aged 10-17 years
- 12% of the New South Wales population (625,454) were aged 18-24 years
- 49% of 10-24 year olds were female
- 1.8% (22,727) of 10-24 year olds identified themselves as Aboriginal
- 5% (67,731) of 10-24 year olds were born in a non-English speaking country. The non-English speaking birthplaces most frequently specified were Vietnam, followed by Lebanon and Hong Kong
- 63% (817,413) lived in Sydney, 9% (113,357) lived in the Hunter area and 6% (74,057) lived in the Illawarra area

3.3 ADOLESCENCE AND YOUNG ADULTHOOD IN THE LIFECYCLE

The period of transition from childhood to adulthood, from dependence on other people for survival to independence, is a period of considerable individual physical and psychological change.

Youths often engage in risk taking behaviour, such as use of alcohol and illicit drugs, and defiance of authority, as they seek to establish their own identity and place in the community.

3.4 SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Youths live in a rapidly changing and increasingly complex society, characterised by:

- high levels of unemployment
- increasing poverty
- the changing nature of families
- the changing role of men and women
- youths staying at school longer
- greater cultural diversity
- the introduction of new technologies.

It is widely accepted that these changes contribute to the transition from childhood to adulthood becoming increasingly complex and difficult for many youths. Social, cultural and economic factors which are related to youth violence are discussed in greater depth in Section Six.

3.5 PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

What may be regarded as violence by one person may not necessarily be regarded as violence by someone else. Adults may also have different perceptions to youth about what is acceptable behaviour.

Public perceptions about youth violence play a critical role in determining the nature of the debate and how society responds. Available data (Mukherjee, 1983; Sercombe, 1991) however, do not support negative public perceptions about the incidence and nature of youth violence, particularly among 10 - 17 year olds.

3.6 THE MEDIA

The media plays an important role in shaping public perceptions and opinions on a range of issues, including youth generally and youth violence.

A study on how youth were represented in magazines and newspapers available in New South Wales found that most of the coverage concerned their involvement in criminal activity (Australian Centre for Independent Journalism, 1992).

Specific research into the reporting of crime in the news media in Australia found that the media has made a positive contribution in leading to the apprehension of offenders, law reform and identification of problems within the criminal justice system (Grabosky & Wilson, 1989). However, the study also found that the media frequently exaggerate and report isolated incidents. The researchers suggest that this type of reporting has contributed to a public perception of so-called "juvenile crime waves".

People's perceptions about violence appear not only to be influenced by media reports about local violence, but also violence which has occurred in other parts of Australia and other countries. For example, a poll showed that Tasmanians were the most concerned about violent crime yet had the lowest rates of violent crime in Australia (Chappell, 1989). The recent shooting in the Sydney suburb of Campsie, described by the media as the Campsie "drive-by", resulted in considerable public concern that Australia was developing gang violence problems similar to that in some cities of the United States. The data found in Section Four do not, however, fully substantiate these concerns.

3.7 YOUTH AS VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE

Much of the public debate on youth violence focuses on youth as perpetrators of violence (Halstead, 1992). However, many youth are the victims of violence, particularly at the hands of other youth (see Section 4.10). The factors which contribute to youth committing violence (discussed in Section Five) can also contribute to youth becoming the victims of violence.

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