

CHAPTER FIVE

SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

This Chapter examines the available evidence linking socio-economic issues with violence. Since the terms of reference for this Inquiry request the Committee to examine the impact of unemployment in relation to youth violence, this indicator forms the main focus of Section 5.1 of this Chapter. The subsequent sections deal with the corollary issues of employment and job training, and alternative means for young people to be provided with support to enable them to contribute to their community.

The Committee also heard considerable evidence on the relationship between homelessness and youth violence, and the issues of homelessness, violence and victimisation, the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program and the Young Homeless Allowance are examined.

5.1 UNEMPLOYMENT

The Committee has heard that the socio-economic status and employment prospects of young people can contribute to anti-social behaviour:

For those young people who have economic and social stability, there is less engagement in violence. For those who are unemployed and have low self-esteem, I think those violent reactions are going to be greater (Brown Evidence, 25.10.93).

The Committee heard that, while rates of criminality in the black and white communities in the United States do not differ greatly in the mid-teenage years, a significant difference becomes apparent in the late teenage years:

whites stop being criminals at around age 18, 19 or 20 whereas blacks do not. The main reason for that difference, I think, is that blacks in the United States have exceptionally high unemployment rates (Polk Evidence, 29.07.94).

Normal adolescent development involves a reduction in risk-taking behaviour as young people leave school, find a job, form relationships and start a family:

Each of those developments tends to lead to a diminution of risk taking and the adventurous kind of behaviour involved in crime. The important part of that is finding a job, having access to a wage (Polk Evidence, 29.07.94).

The Committee has heard that males in particular are socialised to be breadwinners and providers, and by a certain age feel they should have attained goals such as a job and an income. With high levels of youth unemployment, they are often unable to achieve these goals, leading to a sense of frustration. It was suggested to the Committee that this can often manifest itself in the form of violence (Marsden Evidence, 01.11.93).

If young people are unable to gain a sense of self-esteem and gratification from employment, it was suggested that they may attempt to gain some sense of self-worth by other means, such as "putting people down in a verbal sense or putting them down in a physical sense" (Acheson Evidence, 01.11.93).

While businesses actively seek to attract youth expenditure, and the media encourages a consumerist lifestyle, unemployed youth live well below the poverty line, which may further contribute to this frustration (Submission 49).

Most writers agree that unemployment is a detrimental experience for the majority of unemployed people. It has been found, for example, that the unemployed are more depressed and anxious, have lower self-esteem, have poorer psychological well-being, poorer physical health and more life stress, a higher incidence of mental health problems, and higher levels of apathy than the employed, and that these factors are reflected in a more negative body image and depressed appearance (Withers-Mayne, 1990:40).

Several studies in the 1980s, undertaken to study the psychological effects of unemployment, found lower perceived competence and greater depressive tendencies among unemployed youth than among employed Australian youth. For example, Feather (1982, cited in Poole and Goodnow, 1990:17) concluded that the lower self-esteem and depressive symptoms found in his sample of unemployed youth were attributable to "negative experiences of repeated attempts to find work; people with lower self-esteem or with a more depressive outlook may find it harder to get jobs". This is evidence of the circularity of the problem of unemployment.

Some commentators discuss the formation of a youth "underclass", suggesting that the growth of this group could lead to a crime wave:

Without a job, a teenager is left in a limbo between childhood and adulthood, belonging to a subculture that adopts adult habits and behaviour but is not accorded adult respect. It is the growth of this subculture or underclass - which at the moment is characterised by poverty and a lack of work skills, qualifications and experience - that is worrying criminologists, police and the judiciary most. It is the new, and deviant, element in the old problem of youth crime (Bagnall, 1992:36).

In a submission to the federal government's Committee on Employment Opportunities, the then Director of the Australian Institute of Criminology, Duncan Chappell, and Professor John Braithwaite, from the Australian National University, warn that there is a strong correlation between rising levels of long-term unemployment and increases in crime - particularly violent crime.

The submission stated that two-thirds of Australians convicted of homicide in 1991-92 were unemployed when they committed the homicide (Strang, 1993, cited in Braithwaite & Chappell, 1994:2). Braithwaite & Chappell also point out that, according to the National Prison Census of 1992, fewer than one quarter of the country's prison population had jobs at the time of their arrest (Walker and Salloom, 1993, cited in Braithwaite & Chappell, 1994:2).

Although no statistics are available on the employment status of people convicted of domestic violence, the criminologists contend that there is strong reason to suspect that a high proportion of the offenders are unemployed (Braithwaite & Chappell, 1994:2).

They warn that a further expansion in the ranks of the long-term unemployed could lead to the development of a social "underclass" and even greater crime problems. In particular, they suggest that western NSW towns such as Wilcannia, Bourke, Walgett and Moree may suffer the worst crime rates in the state because of problems of unemployed Aborigines whom they consider to have even less of a future than the underclass in American cities (Braithwaite & Chappell, 1994:5).

Discussions of young people as being part of a juvenile "underclass" often suggest and label all disadvantaged young people as being criminally inclined which is clearly not the case (Bessant, 1995:35).

These approaches often result in a perception and fear of young people as threats to law and order and are used to justify demands that criminality and violence be contained:

As local youth unemployment escalates and its associated underclass mushrooms ... crime is becoming simpler, more effective for a legion of kids kids break the law ... The call goes out - and is taken up with passion by the public - for tougher, sterner sentences and less pussyfooting around the problem of youth crime (Bagnall, 1992:36).

It is true that the unemployed are highly represented among persons who appear before the courts. In examining the percentage who were unemployed of those appearing before the lower courts in NSW between 1982 and 1987, Cuneen suggested that this represented approximately five times that of unemployed people in the general community (Cuneen, 1991:324).

A study by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research of 186,304 offenders in 1987-88 found that low socio-economic status was positively associated with conviction rates for people living in Local Government areas in the Sydney Statistical Division. Indicators of socio-economic status that were evaluated included income, unemployment, youth unemployment and occupational status. Other variables such as the proportions of Aborigines, single parent families and public renters were regarded as measures of "disadvantage". For Local Government areas outside the Sydney Statistical Division, these measures of disadvantage were identified as the most important correlates of conviction rates. The report concludes that Local Government areas with high scores on a number of single indicators of social and economic disadvantage, as well as on composite variables measuring disadvantage, consistently tend to have higher rates of convictions for offences against the person and property offending (Devery, 1991:57).

Several studies have reviewed the available research evidence of the link between unemployment and crime. Researchers employing various methodologies have not demonstrated a strong link between employment status and violence. "Cross-sectional" studies involve snap-shots of particular social aspects of different areas which are then compared. Box (1987:78-87) examined 32 cross-sectional studies and found 19 of them revealed a positive association between unemployment and crime rates. This association appeared to be stronger in the area of property crime, although several studies did reveal some relationship between unemployment and crimes of violence.

"Time series" studies of unemployment and crime compare changes in unemployment rates with crime rates over time. Time series studies reviewed by Box (1987:78) provide some support for a linkage of changes in unemployment rates to crime rates particularly for young males.

In a review of available data, Chiricos (1987) separated studies of property crimes and violent crimes. He found that while 40% of the studies involving property crimes revealed an association with unemployment, only 22% of the studies involving violent crimes revealed such a relationship.

Longitudinal studies, which monitor groups of individuals over a period of time, have the potential to more directly establish a causal link between unemployment and crime. Arrest data relating to a sub-sample of a Philadelphia cohort study of 10,000 boys suggested unemployment has an "instantaneous effect" on criminal involvement. However, rates of arrest may not provide a true picture of offending, as many offences may go undetected. When the sample group was asked about these other offences, no relationship was found between these self-reported serious offences or violent crimes and unemployment. This suggests that research findings can be heavily influenced by methodology (Box, 1987:94). Arrest rates may reveal increased police activity, or the targeting of particular groups, rather than increased offending.

Similarly, using unemployment rates or status as an indicator may be problematic. Watts contends that the three major sources of unemployment data in Australia use different criteria in determining unemployment status, produce different estimates, and often use samples (Watts, 1994:12).

The vast majority of unemployed people do not offend in any way, suggesting no clear causal link can be established between unemployment and violent offending. It may be the case, however, that on the individual level, frustrations resulting from unemployment may exacerbate a tendency to delinquency. It is equally possible that such frustrations may have led these individuals to drop out of school or the labour force, with criminal activity then restricting their employment options.

In a 14 year study of delinquency in NSW, Kraus (1979) found that juvenile delinquents had a relatively high unemployment rate because they do not avail themselves of, or do not have access to, existing job opportunities. He concluded, however, that increasing unemployment did not lead to increased delinquency. The Committee notes that the employment market has changed considerably since this research was carried out.

Weatherburn (1992:6) contends that an important distinction between unemployment precipitating involvement in criminal activity and unemployment increasing an individual's frequency of offending must be drawn. Most studies, however, fail to draw such a distinction.

The majority of studies conclude that while there may be a relationship between unemployment and criminal behaviour, a stronger relationship can be drawn between income inequality and crime (Braithwaite, 1978:62).

The Committee heard that to draw a direct causal relationship between unemployment and violent crime would be misguided:

Violent behaviour is a very complex matter there are a lot of unemployed young people out there struggling in ways that are very humbling in the circumstances, who do not turn either to violent offending or any sort of offending (Alder Evidence, 29.07.94).

The Committee is concerned that approaches which concentrate on labelling a particular group as an underclass may fail to focus on the real issues of inequality and lack of opportunity that are disadvantaging this group.

While much attention has been paid to the implications of unemployment for the problems of delinquency and crime, it has been suggested that the significant implications that long-term unemployment has for family formation and maintenance should not be ignored (Polk and Tait, 1990:23). In addition, unemployment and poverty are related to other contributing factors such as boredom, dependency, and powerlessness.

5.2 TRAINING

A range of state and federal training programs was discussed in the Committee's Youth Violence Issues Paper.

Working Nation (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1994:96), the Federal Government's white paper on employment and growth, outlined a strategy to improve youth unemployment rates through an increase in training programs for school leavers and tighter links between schools and industry. Under the reforms, it was expected that labour market training places for young people under 18 years would double over three years to 50,000 commencements in 1996-97.

Unemployed 15-17 year-olds are receiving a new benefit, the Youth Training Allowance, aimed at improving access to training.

The Youth Training Initiative ensures that each unemployed person under 18 is allocated a specific case manager who will help him or her to search for suitable work, training or an education place. This intensive case management begins 13 weeks after a young person registers as unemployed (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1994:96). The Committee believes that the success of this approach will depend on the allocated case-load of these managers and their suitability for the task.

Those who are still without a job after six months are given a place in a labour market program or a special vocational training program. The Youth Training allowance will be subject to an activity test, and those who refuse a job or training place will have their payments reduced for a set period (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1994:96-97).

The Federal Government has promised \$1.1 billion to create an extra 50,000 TAFE positions over the period from 1993 to 1996 (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1994:93-4) in an effort to improve formal training for apprentices and trainees.

However, several witnesses were critical of a focus on youth training schemes that are not linked to on-going employment:

I can no longer support the Federal Government's strategy for training and education. I do not believe it will give these kids jobs. I have some of the best trained, most highly educated, homeless, unemployed young people. Often it only makes them feel worse (Clay Evidence, 26.04.94).

The Aboriginal Liaison officers of Riverina Health Service also criticised existing Job Search Service schemes for training young Aboriginal people without guaranteeing on-going employment (Shay and Packer Evidence, 12.08.94).

A submission from the Wollongong Youth Refuge Association Incorporation is critical of the fact that the Youth Strategy Action Grants, available through the federal Department of Employment, Education and Training, only fund one-off programs for one year. The submission suggests that this restricts funding to direct service provision, and does not allow for adequate work in co-ordination, community development, education and awareness raising (Submission 19). The Committee believes the extension of the scheme should be considered.

RECOMMENDATION 14

That the Minister for Industrial Relations encourage the Federal Minister for Employment, Education and Training to extend the Youth Strategy Action Grants Program to ensure funding continues beyond the establishment grant.

5.3 EMPLOYMENT

The Committee believes that governments, in consultation with the community and business, have a responsibility to develop a range of opportunities for young people to contribute to their community in constructive ways.

For many young people, employment may offer the opportunity to develop self-esteem and self-reliance and become financially independent.

Winefield and Tiggeman (1985, cited in Poole and Goodnow, 1990:17), for example, in their study of work and school patterns of youth over a three-year span found that self-esteem was greater for the group of youth which joined the labour market than for those who continued studying.

The Committee also heard evidence of the considerable health benefits for Aboriginal people involved in the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) (Brown Evidence, 10.08.94).

Employment may also have a direct impact on the criminal behaviour of individual offenders. The Committee was informed of an employment access program in Victoria which placed young offenders in employment. Young people who were able to get jobs were much less likely to engage in criminal behaviour than those who did not (Alder Evidence, 29.07.94).

Some commentators have suggested that a major growth in the economy and a boost in the number of jobs overall will not substantially increase the number of career opportunities for young people because the entry level positions they used to occupy no longer exist (Polk and Tait, 1990:18).

In a submission to the Committee, the Western Sydney Committee of the Inter-departmental Committee on Youth Affairs noted that training courses are not creating youth employment, and advocated alternatives such as market gardens and co-operatives, and the restructuring of work practices (Submission 53).

Representatives of Men Against Sexual Assault (MASA) recommended that programs for young people who have dropped out of school, or who are in danger of dropping out, such as the Helping Early Leavers Program and Circuit Breaker, be expanded to promote young people taking control over their financial situations. This could involve the establishment of alternative economic systems such as allowances, local employment training schemes, tax and subsidy incentives for young people setting up their own enterprises, and the provision of unused State Government land and property for these purposes (O'Dwyer Evidence, 29.06.94).

A range of federal and state government employment programs were discussed in the Committee's Youth Violence Issues Paper. There are several other initiatives in various jurisdictions which are attempting to provide employment for target groups, including those outlined below.

Part of the Committee's key recommendation dealing with employment and leisure supports priority being given to job creation in areas of high youth unemployment.

It was suggested to the Committee job sharing should be facilitated in order to allow a greater proportion of society to have the benefits that employment offers (Berry Evidence, 10.02.94). The Committee supports this approach.

The Committee also believes that all training and employment initiatives should be structured to maximise the likelihood of on-going employment for young people.

RECOMMENDATION 15

That Government agencies, in partnership with community organisations and the private sector, give priority to job creation in areas of high youth unemployment.

RECOMMENDATION 16

That the Minister for Industrial Relations act to ensure that appropriate opportunities are provided for part-time work and job sharing to increase the availability of employment options.

RECOMMENDATION 17

That the Minister for Industrial Relations ensure, in consultation with Federal counterparts, that all training and employment initiatives are structured to maximise the likelihood of on-going employment for young people.

5.3.1 The Youth Employment and Enterprise Project

The Youth Employment and Enterprise Project (YEEP) in Adelaide is attempting to create jobs for young people by mobilising the business sector and empowering young people. The Lord Mayor of Adelaide, as Patron of YEEP, sponsored a Business Forum in 1993 which brought together key business people in a drive to create more jobs for young people. Participating businesses were given a positive public profile for their commitment to unemployed young people, enhancing their business image (Marsland, 1993:7). A total of 1,400 jobs were created in the first twelve months of the initiative.

The second aspect of the three-phase model involved the development of several youth industries in the Adelaide local government area. Three enterprises have been established: an ice-cream outlet; a pine furniture making workshop; and a food catering business, employing a total of 25 young people. A position of Youth Enterprise Officer is to be created. Funding assistance has been made available from the Australian Youth Initiatives Grants Scheme.

The Enterprise Development phase of the project seeks to give young people the opportunity to develop their own enterprising ideas. The Council is providing office space and a position of Co-ordinator is planned to assist young people in the development of their ideas and facilitate access to the business and general community.

5.3.2 Community Development Employment Project

During the Committee's visit to Wellington, members heard evidence from the Chairman and participants of the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP). The Orana Aboriginal Corporation CDEP has 90 participants working on a variety of projects that are developed to upgrade skills of Aboriginal people, and improve race relations.

It has been suggested to the Committee that while CDEP have proven economic and social benefits, including health improvements and crime reduction, these are being put at risk by the financial disadvantage that is being experienced by Orana Aboriginal Corporation employees (Brown correspondence, 26.08.94).

While the tax free threshold for the unemployed is \$7,360, this threshold is only \$5,400 for employed persons. The employees of the Orana Aboriginal Corporation CDEP pay an average of \$9.30 tax per week from a salary which is equivalent to the unemployment benefit.

In addition, unemployed persons are assisted with rent subsidies of up to \$35 per week, so that employees are effectively penalised for working under the CDEP scheme.

The Chairman suggested that:

It is very difficult to keep people motivated when if they sit at home they are better off financially than when they are employed on the CDEP (Brown Evidence, 10.08.94).

The Committee believes that the taxation penalties applying to CDEP employees should be removed.

Some Committee members also believe that there would be virtues in expanding CDEP programs to include non-Aboriginal youth, and the Committee recommends that the Minister for Industrial Relations, in consultation with his federal counterparts, give consideration to the expansion of the scheme.

RECOMMENDATION 18

That the Minister for Industrial Relations consult appropriate Federal Ministers to ensure that taxation penalties against Aboriginal workers in CDEP programs are removed.

RECOMMENDATION 19

That the Minister for Industrial Relations, in consultation with appropriate Federal counterparts, consider the expansion of the CDEP scheme to non-Aboriginal unemployed young people in selected communities.

5.3.3 The Job Compact

The Federal Government's Job Compact aims to reduce the level of long term unemployment, improve the skills and competitiveness of those assisted, and increase the availability to employers of workers with suitable skills and experience.

Under the Compact, employers are offered job subsidies and the opportunity to pay below-award training wages when hiring people who have been out of work for 18 months or more. Employers are also be offered a bonus to keep Job Compact participants on the job at the full-award rate for three months after the nine-month subsidised period has expired (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1994:119).

Braithwaite & Chappell, in their submission to the federal government's Committee on Employment Opportunities, supported the expansion of artificial labour market programs above a reliance on normal economic growth to create jobs, because the programs benefit the long-term unemployed. They also suggest that the compact would be an effective way of breaking the cycle that leads offenders to commit more crime because their criminal histories restrict them from finding work (Braithwaite and Chappel, 1994:4).

5.4 ALTERNATIVES TO EMPLOYMENT AND JOB TRAINING

In evidence to the Committee, a representative of the Young Women's Electoral Lobby suggested that community and classroom education is required to remove the stigma of unemployment in an economic climate that fails to provide full employment:

We need to let [children] know that they will always be of value to us and to society even if they are unable to find paid work. There is a great deal of necessary and rewarding work out there which is unpaid, but which can provide people with structure to their week, and feelings of contributing and the learning of important skills (Berry Evidence, 10.02.94).

Part of the Committee's key recommendation dealing with employment and leisure is concerned with the development of activities for unemployed youth. The Government, in participation with community organisations, should sponsor the development of learning and recreational activities for unemployed youth. Funding for training programs to train young people in peer education and in establishing programs in which they can work with other young people to reduce violence was supported in evidence to the Committee (O'Dwyer Evidence, 29.06.94). The Committee supports this approach as an example of the way young people can be encouraged to contribute constructively to their community.

The Committee heard that options such as employment within charitable organisations and the payment of a living wage should be available, with the status of this type of work raised (Berry Evidence, 10.02.94).

In addition to being provided with training and employment opportunities, the Committee believes that young people should also be provided with information on alternative ways of contributing to their community.

The Committee heard that full-time vocational training may be inappropriate for many young homeless people suffering depression or emotional distress (Clay Evidence, 26.04.94).

Specific programs may be required to deal with groups of young people with behavioural problems. One example of this approach is the day program at Rosemount Youth and Family Services Inc in Sydney's Dulwich Hill which caters for unemployed 14 to 18 year old adolescents who are experiencing problems in daily living. While some of the young people have been homeless and are living in refuges or medium term accommodation units, the majority are still living with family or extended family. They often have school related difficulties which manifest in behaviours such as truancy, acting out, depression and minor offences. Most are experiencing family difficulties and some are victims of physical and/or sexual abuse. The program is run five days a week for a period of ten weeks and includes workshops in:

- literacy and numeracy
- work preparation skills
- drug and alcohol education
- craft
- relating to others & confidence building
- sexuality

- leisure
- health and hygiene
- individual work

The program attempts a holistic approach, with a family counsellor working with the family and with the networks of the young person, and an After-Care Worker being involved with the young people and their families for one year or longer after they leave the program (Submission 61).

The Committee believes that special programs may be required to develop work preparation skills in young people who have exhibited behaviour disorders.

RECOMMENDATION 20

That the Government, in partnership with community organisations, sponsor the development of learning and recreational activities for unemployed youth. As one means of advancing this process, the Minister for Community Services should seek expressions of interest and fund the development of a pilot scheme providing training for unemployed young people to develop anti-violence programs and workshops to educate their peers.

RECOMMENDATION 21

That the Minister for Industrial Relations, in consultation with his federal counterparts and community groups, ensure that unemployed young people are given information on alternative ways of contributing to the community through volunteer programs.

RECOMMENDATION 22

That the Minister for Community Services ensure that adequate funding is allocated to programs attempting to develop work preparation skills in behaviour-disordered young people.

5.5 HOMELESSNESS

The Committee heard that there is a shortage of low-cost, affordable housing:

There are no flats cheap enough to rent. Often [young people] are not eligible for public housing (Clay Evidence, 26.04.94).

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's National Inquiry into Homeless Children commissioned a consultant to assess all available data and arrive at a 'best estimate' of the numbers of homeless young people. Dr Rodney Fopp concluded that there were, at the very

least, 8,500 homeless 12-15-years olds in Australia over a 12 month period and 3,500 16 and 17-year-olds at a given time, including 16 and 17-year-olds at serious risk of becoming homeless (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989:67).

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, inquiring into aspects of youth homelessness, heard evidence of a range of factors contributing to youth violence. Factors cited include family conflict, such as family violence and abuse, family poverty and resulting stress, high incidence of youth unemployment and increased dependency of young people within families, a history of State intervention and wardship, substance abuse and mental illness (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 1995:37-38).

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission found evidence of increases in the proportion of young homeless people presenting at supported accommodation services who were, or had been, State wards. The Inquiry concluded

This evidence is a serious indictment of the State - which has not only the power to provide for these children, but an obligation, and the resources, to do so (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989:110).

The Committee is concerned that the management of wards in the past has not been satisfactory, and notes the management of children in substitute care in New South Wales is progressively being transferred to the non-government sector. The Committee believes it essential under the new arrangements that the State recognises its statutory responsibility in ensuring these children are adequately supported while in care and assisted in their transition to living independently in the community.

RECOMMENDATION 23

That the Minister for Community Services closely monitors the delegation of accommodation, care and maintenance of wards to the non-government sector to ensure his statutory obligation to provide adequate support is met.

5.5.1 Homelessness and Violence

Research evidence suggests that homeless young people are at particular risk of becoming involved in crime and violence. In a recent survey of 50 young homeless people in North-East Melbourne, 39% of males and 34% of females indicated in interviews that they had experienced feelings of wanting to hurt others (Fuller *et al*, 1994:33).

The Committee heard that for homeless young people, violence is widely experienced:

You cannot avoid [violence]. It is there every day. It's an awful thing to have to do but you have to be violent to survive. If you are not, then you just won't make it. I abhor violence, I hate it, but I had to use it for survival (Williams Evidence, 28.07.94).

In evidence to the Committee, the Co-ordinator of the Wollongong Youth Refuge Association Incorporation indicated that 37% of their target group over the previous year had been known offenders, and had committed assault, robbery without a weapon, break and enter, car theft and shoplifting. Two young people known to housing workers had been charged with murder in the previous two years, and approximately six young people had been charged with other serious offences such as armed robbery or aggravated assault (Clay Evidence, 26.04.94). On the other hand, the Committee heard from the Assistant Manager of the Kings Cross Adolescent Referral and Support Service that while the potential for violent behaviour by young people living on the streets could be considered high,

On only one occasion has any of my workers actually been harmed, and the worker was bitten on the chest, but apart from that incident, it is fairly low in terms of the kids that we deal with and what we are actually doing, removing young people from a place (Atkinson Evidence, 29.08.94).

The Committee also heard that determining the direction of any causal association between homelessness and youth violence may be problematic:

I am not that clear on whether it is homelessness that contributes to youth violence or in fact youth violence that contributes to homelessness (Atkinson Evidence, 29.08.94).

Young people may leave home for a variety of reasons, including abuse and neglect and other problems within the family that may have behavioural effects.

The Committee heard that a sustained experience of poverty and homelessness, resulting from a failed home situation, can result in self-destructive behaviour, including conscious self-infection with the HIV virus (In camera Evidence).

5.5.2 Homelessness and Victimization

Homeless young people are particularly vulnerable to violent victimisation. In interviews with 51 homeless youth under the age of 18 in Victoria, 86% reported both a fear of violence and having been physically hurt since leaving home. Approximately 65% said they had been physically assaulted and 52% experienced sexual assault (Alder, 1991:10).

Violence was often experienced at the hands of strangers. Approximately 96% of young men reported having been physically assaulted since they left home, predominantly in a fight with other young men. The second major source of violence, accounting for approximately 39% of all violent incidents that were reported, was the police. Approximately 58% of males and 47% of females reported being physically assaulted by police since they left home. The vulnerability of marginalised young people to violent abuse by police was confirmed in a national study in five states, and is consistent with the findings of the Burdekin committee and local studies in other states on the level of violence against homeless young people (Alder Evidence, 29.07.94).

The Committee heard that young women may be particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation:

Young women that we are involved with have often found themselves involved in exploitative relationships, including prostitution (Funk Evidence, 28.07.94).

5.5.3 Violence in Supported Accommodation Services

In evidence from the Department of Community Services, the Committee was informed:

We are not aware that there is a high incidence of violence amongst young people and State wards in care. However, given the circumstances that many of these young people in care experience, it is likely that they will act out their difficulties; but it can be exhibited by withdrawal as well as acting out (Shier Evidence, 29.08.94)

Other evidence to the Committee suggested that violence in supported accommodation services was a considerable problem.

A study over two years of 40 teenagers in a medium term youth accommodation unit in Newcastle revealed that most had been subjected to physical and/or sexual abuse. Their responses to conflict were also often violent, with frequent low level violence, such as threats, pushing, verbal abuse, and occasionally more serious incidents. Conflict often led to residents leaving the centre. Twenty residents were asked to leave by staff, with nine committing acts of violence against other residents or physically threatening staff or residents. Poor self-esteem was found to be a significant barrier to teaching conflict resolution to residents (Submission 49).

The Co-ordinator of the Wollongong Youth Refuge Association Incorporation indicated that staff have reported that 83% of the young people they work with are showing an increased incidence of anger and aggression, including minor assaults on other young people, and bullying and intimidation (Clay Evidence, 26.04.94).

The Jasper Residential Unit provides services for young women aged between 12 and 18 years who are wards of the state, and who previously have had multiple placements in government group homes, youth detention institutions, and with foster families. Many have also spent time on the streets, and usually come from abusive backgrounds.

The Committee heard that behavioural problems experienced at Jasper are often quite extreme, including smashing windows in other units and attacks on staff, other young people and self-harm. Examples of incidents that have occurred at Jasper include:

- several instances of one girl restraining a staff member while a second girl beats and kicks another resident;
- several instances of residents armed with kitchen knives locking themselves and a staff member in the office and threatening to kill the staff member;
- a resident self-mutilating by slashing her body with razor blades, telling staff she has AIDS and threatening them with her blood, and then attempting to hang herself from a balcony; and

- a resident abducting another at knife point with the intention of killing her over a disputed boyfriend (Wilson Evidence, 29.07.94).

In each of these occurrences staff intervention prevented an escalation of violence. Residents are provided with training in managing their emotions.

It was suggested to the Committee that some young women have been through so many services that the Department of Community Services has no further alternatives to offer them. One Jasper resident had been refused accommodation at the Department of Community Services Ormond facility after having previously smashed windows and been restrained by staff. The Program Manager of the Unit also outlined the difficulties experienced in attempting to obtain appropriate psychiatric treatment for such residents (Wilson Evidence, 29.07.94). The Director of the Care and Protection Directorate, while not familiar with the particular circumstances of the case, reaffirmed that the Department has the primary responsibility to provide care for all children at risk, and that the Department of Community Services is developing reform strategies for the programs at Ormond and Minali (Shier Evidence, 29.08.94). These reforms are discussed in further detail in Chapter 13. The Committee believes that the Department must continue to ensure that appropriate placements are available to young people with severe acting out behaviours. Risks to staff and other residents should be minimised and information on appropriate intervention and anger control strategies developed.

The Committee was informed that a number of longer term residents of supported accommodation services demonstrate behavioural change because they have been given an opportunity to express their anger in a safe environment. However, since many young people stay in supported accommodation for a relatively short time, the opportunities for intervention, both on an individual and family level, may be limited:

We cannot force them to counselling or assessment. We cannot force their families to come in. We certainly have more trouble getting families to counselling than we do getting young people to accept help (Clay Evidence, 26.04.94).

RECOMMENDATION 24

That the Minister for Community Services ensure that appropriate placements are available to young people with severe acting-out behaviours, and that these placements minimise risks to other residents and staff.

RECOMMENDATION 25

That the Minister for Community Services ensure that staff of supported accommodation services are provided with information on best practices in intervening in violent incidents, to reduce risks to themselves and other residents, and on appropriate strategies for encouraging residents to deal with anger and aggression in non-violent ways.

5.5.4 Staffing of Supported Accommodation Services

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) is a joint Federal-State funded program which supports a range of non-government community organisations providing transitional accommodation and support services for homeless people in crisis.

The Committee heard that while the services managed by the Wollongong Youth Refuge Association Incorporation have attempted to manage the target group of young people exhibiting challenging behaviour, funding is available for one staff member on duty at any one time. It was suggested to the Committee that community supported accommodation services could more effectively deal with violent youths if staffing levels were increased to ensure that two staff members could be on duty for safety and best work practice reasons to allow direct intervention. Incidents which possibly could have been prevented in Illawarra include an armed robbery by a tenant, physical assaults by residents, and regular verbal abuse and harassment (Submission 19).

The Department of Community Services has recognised the need for intensive work with homeless young people by proposing that two staff be on duty at any one time, in accord with the Usher Report. However, this level of staffing is not available in many accommodation services. Staffing levels also restrict the provision of services to young people in need. The conditions for the Wollongong Youth Refuge Association Incorporation to open an adolescent health service were that two staff be on duty (Submission 19).

The Wollongong Youth Refuge Association Incorporation auspices a number of residential service providers who carry out thorough assessments of clients, and the Committee heard that if a client is considered potentially dangerous to staff or other residents, an alternative safe environment must be found. Because of the limited options in such cases, the Department of Community Services has ensured that two staff have been on duty to manage such situations (Clay Evidence, 26.04.94).

While the Jasper Unit receives funding through the SAAP, additional funding from Centacare is vital in ensuring that adequate staffing levels are maintained to offer intensive programs (Wilson Evidence, 29.07.94).

The Committee believes adequate funding should be available to ensure two staff members are on duty at any one time in supported accommodation services, and that these additional staffing resources be used to provide further services, especially training for residents in the management of violence.

RECOMMENDATION 26

That the Minister for Community Services ensure that

- **services funded under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program which target young people with behaviour disorders are provided with adequate resources to ensure two staff members are on duty at any one time; and**

- **the additional staffing be used to provide further services, especially training for residents in the management of violence.**

5.5.5 Concentration of Supported Accommodation Services

The Committee heard that the high concentration of supported accommodation services in particular areas may lead to problems of statistical anomalies for crime and violence:

There was one particular place that was associated with an enormous amount of ... [violent] offences which led to convictions, and the police statistics in the local area went through the roof (Acheson evidence, 01.11.93).

The Burdekin report on homelessness recommended that supported accommodation services be located in areas of greatest need, but the Committee heard that young people are usually brought to suburban services from areas such as Kings Cross.

The Committee heard that while approximately 50% of all supported accommodation places in Sydney are located in the Marrickville area:

none of those local refuges co-ordinate their activities amongst each other. There is not a full spectrum of services from crisis need to independent accommodation. Within that plethora of services there is no strategy that says that local kids who become homeless in the Marrickville area will get a bed. It is a feeder area for the whole State (Pisarski Evidence, 29.07.94).

The Co-ordinator of the Marrickville Community Youth Support Project indicated that since refuges receive funding under Commonwealth guidelines, Commonwealth government agencies should also be brought into the consultative process to address these issues (Pisarski Evidence, 29.07.94). The Committee supports this approach and believes services should be available to needy young people in all areas.

RECOMMENDATION 27

That the Minister for Community Services urge his Federal counterpart to ensure that adequate services are available through the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program to provide needy young people in all areas with appropriate accommodation services.

5.5.6 Young Homeless Allowance

Recent debate around the federal government's former Young Homeless Allowance encouraging young people to leave home was discussed in evidence to the Committee. The Allowance is now referred to as the Independent Youth Training Allowance at the homeless rate. The Committee was informed by a young person with a history of homelessness that

People apply for [the Young Homeless Allowance] because they feel there is no other way for them, they cannot go home. They either feel unloved or they are abused in some form. It may not be physically; it could be just emotionally abused (Williams Evidence, 28.07.94).

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs (1995) have recently released their *Report on Aspects of Youth Homelessness*. The terms of reference for the Inquiry required the Committee to, among other things, report on the appropriateness of income support arrangements for homeless young people, noting the need to not create undue incentives to leave home or school.

While that Committee acknowledged that there appeared to be circumstances in which inadequate assessments were made and where little assistance was offered to parents and to young people when they were in crisis, the majority of the Committee did not support the view that the allowance itself acts as an incentive to leave home. The Committee found it difficult to find evidence to support the claim that the allowance is an incentive to leave home when many young homeless people are living without any formal support (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 1995:131-132).

However, the Committee supported the need for developing better ways of including parents in the assessment process.

During the course of that Committee's Inquiry, the Federal Government tightened the payment of the Young Homeless Allowance by a gazetted Ministerial Determination allowing parents to be contacted before payments are made, unless there is any threat to the welfare of the young person. Personal information may also be disclosed to parents.

The overarching emphasis of the revised policy is that parents must be contacted by a social worker during the assessment of a claim for the homeless rate unless there are very good reasons not to do so. In addition to the former requirement to contact parents before the homeless rate could be granted in cases where the young person is not allowed by parents to live at home, parents are now contacted before the homeless rate can be granted on the basis of domestic disharmony. Contact with parents during the initial assessment phase is subject to client consent. However, if the client does not consent, and there is no reason to believe the client would be at risk, the claim is rejected. However, no contact should be made with parents where violence or abuse is suspected without the client's permission (Department of Social Security:1994a).

In evidence to the Committee, the Director of the Care and Protection Directorate of the Department of Community Services supported the Young Homeless Allowance, provided that clear protocols are developed to ensure that young people applying for the allowance are in genuine need. The Director supported attempts to provide families experiencing problems with appropriate mediation services (Shier Evidence, 29.08.94).

The Commonwealth, State and Territory protocol for the case management of young homeless clients has led to the Federal Department of Social Security issuing a further National Instruction. All applicants for Commonwealth income support at the homeless rate aged less than 15 years are referred to a Department of Social Security social worker, and where the young person is not going to return home, a referral to a state welfare department is arranged for their full assessment and support (Department of Social Security:1994b).

In those instances where allegations of abuse have been made, the current Commonwealth/State Protocol should ensure that the appropriate State child protection authorities investigate these claims (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 1995:285).

Parents should be contacted as part of the protective assessment undertaken by the State/Territory Child Protection authorities. Provided these procedures operate effectively, there should be very few situations in which parents are not able to obtain basic information about their children, which would enable them to at least know that they are alive and safe (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 1995:286).

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs recommended payment at the homeless rate should be subject to an initial two week review and assessment following grant of the payment and then a continuous six weekly review. This would address more adequately the concerns of parents and many youth and family workers who believe that the current arrangements tend to lock parents and young people in a fixed position in the early days of leaving home, making reconciliation difficult (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 1995:122-123).

It has been suggested the protocol has not always worked efficiently in New South Wales as delays by the Department of Community Services in processing referrals, and a refusal by the Department of Social Security to pay the allowance in the interim, has financially penalised young people (Horin, 1995:3).

The Committee urges the Minister for Community Services to continue to support young homeless people by facilitating the processing of referrals and continuing to support the Federal Government in the development of protocols and monitoring the effectiveness of income support for those in genuine need.

The Committee encourages the referral of young people and their families to appropriate mediation services where reconciliation appears feasible and recommends the development of further services. The Committee believes, however, that the payment of the Allowance should not be made conditional on attempts at reconciliation where genuine need has been established, and where the young person is in demonstrable danger in the home environment.

RECOMMENDATION 28

That the Minister for Community Services urge Federal counterparts to develop further mediation services for families of children applying to receive the Young Homeless Allowance.

5.6 CONCLUSIONS AND FINDINGS

- High levels of **youth unemployment** can lead to frustration and anger and may manifest in the form of violence. Unemployed people are highly represented among persons who appear before the courts. The Committee is also concerned that unemployment contributes to **poverty and income inequality** as some studies conclude that while there may be some relationship between unemployment and criminal behaviour, a stronger relationship can be drawn between these variables and crime. Disadvantaged areas consistently tend to have higher rates of convictions for offences against the person and property offending.
- Governments, in consultation with the community and business, have a responsibility to develop a range of opportunities for young people to contribute to their community in constructive ways. For many people, **employment** may offer the opportunity to develop self-esteem and self-reliance and become financially independent. Employment may also have a direct impact on the criminal behaviour of individual offenders. Part of the Committee's key recommendation dealing with employment and leisure supports priority being given to job creation schemes in areas of high youth unemployment.

The Committee also heard evidence of the considerable health benefits for Aboriginal people involved in the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP), and supports the expansion of the scheme to include non-Aboriginal youth. **All training and employment initiatives should be structured to maximise the likelihood of on-going employment for young people.**

Part of the Committee's key recommendation dealing with employment and leisure also urges the Government, in participation with community organisations, to develop learning and recreational activities for unemployed youth.

- Research evidence suggests that **homeless young people** are at particular risk of becoming involved in crime and violence. Homeless young people are particularly vulnerable to violent victimisation. Violence in supported accommodation services also appears to be a considerable problem.

The Department of Community Services must continue to ensure that appropriate placements are available to young people with severe acting out behaviours; that adequate funding should be available to ensure two staff members are on duty at any one time in supported accommodation services; and that additional staffing resources are used to provide further services, especially training for residents in the management of violence. Supported accommodation services should be available to needy young people in all areas.