



Australian Government



# **Violence and Safety**

A report on **youTHINK** findings and website discussions

# Violence and Safety: a Report on youTHINK Findings and Website Discussions

## Background

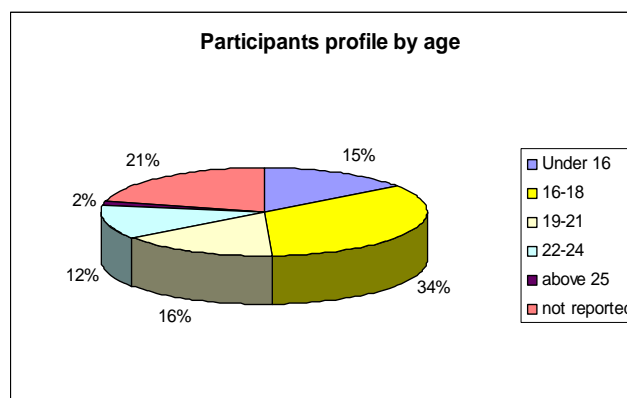
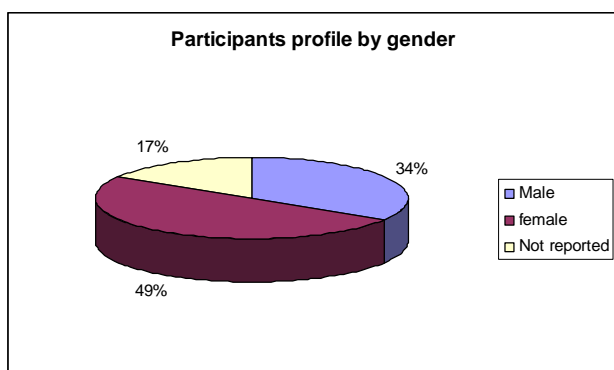
On 20 February 2009, the inaugural Australian Youth Forum (AYF) – **youTHINK** event was held in ten locations around Australia (all capital cities as well as Cairns and Alice Springs), connected live via satellite. Six hundred and eighteen (618) young people attended the forums. Both Sydney and Melbourne had the largest attendance with over 100 participants in each location. Darwin had the least number of participants with 23 young people.

Participants filled in registration forms giving demographic information including date of birth and gender. The data presented below is based on information provided in the registration forms<sup>1</sup>. Where information regarding date of birth and gender was not given, it is treated as 'not reported' in the analysis. Across all locations, three hundred and seven (307) participants were female (49%). One third (34%) of participants were aged 16 to 18 years. Table 1 summarises the profile of participants at the national level.

'Violence and Safety' was one of two topics discussed at this event.

**Table 1. Profile of participants nationwide**

Number of participants by gender			Number of participants by age		
Male	209	34%	Under 16	94	15%
Female	307	49%	16-18	209	34%
Not reported	102	17%	19-21	98	16%
			22-24	76	12%
			above 25	10	2%
			Not reported	131	21%
<b>Total</b>	<b>618</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>618</b>	<b>100%</b>



Young people were also given the opportunity and tools to host their own forum if they were unable to attend the live event on 20 February 2009. The ideas and findings from these events were then provided to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) for consideration. The AYF also conducted an online discussion on violence and safety through the AYF website. A total of 79 ideas posts were received during the time this discussion was active.

As the inquiry will also look at the relationship between bullying and violence, a summary of the major ideas suggested through an earlier website discussion on bullying are also included below.

<sup>1</sup> Demographic data excludes people who registered but did not attend.

## ***Executive Summary***

At **youTHINK**, on 20 February 2009, various concerns were raised in the different locations on the topic of violence and safety. There were, however, a number of common themes across all locations. The following section focuses on these issues. Many of these themes are interlinked, which reflects the multi-dimensional nature of this issue.

The most common themes to emerge from the **youTHINK** discussion on 'Violence and Safety' were:

1. Substance misuse, such as the effects of binge drinking, and the impact on levels of violence
2. Education on the consequences of violent behaviour and alternative conflict management strategies
3. The relationship between young people and the police
4. The role of mixed media
5. Availability of suitable youth spaces and services
6. Lack of activities for young people and boredom
7. The important role of families and good parenting
8. Lack of public transport

These themes are discussed in more detail below, along with the major themes, ideas and suggestions that were gathered through other avenues such as **youTHINK** 'Host your own Forum' and the online 'Have a Say' discussions. Most of the key themes were consistent across the different consultation methods.

As well as the issue of violence and safety, the AYF has also conducted a website discussion on the topic of bullying, which included the issue of cyber bullying. This discussion received a total of 61 ideas posts. As this is an area that the inquiry intends to consider as a part of this process, the key themes and ideas from the website discussion are also included below.

Whilst no specific recommendations were sought at the **youTHINK** event, a number of ideas and suggestions on how to address these issues were made. These are outlined under the heading '**youTHINK** - Ideas for the Future'.

## ***Key Themes from youTHINK***

### ***Substance misuse***

Substance misuse and the relationship with violence was discussed at nearly all of the **youTHINK** locations. There was a general acknowledgement by participants of the complexity of the issue. Several themes became apparent in these discussions, such as the perceived direct linkages between binge drinking and violence, a general cultural acceptance of drinking, rates of underage drinking and a lack of education about responsible alcohol consumption.

Many young people felt that Australia's cultural attitude to, and acceptance of, drinking is a major contributing factor in the levels of underage drinking, binge drinking and disruptive and violent behaviour. Participants at the Cairns location felt that this was, in some cases, affected by parents behaviour and views in relation to alcohol consumption. Generally, it was felt that young people are not educated on responsible alcohol consumption, and this lack of education can lead to irresponsible drinking and disruptive or violent behaviour.

Discussion of the Government's current alcohol advertising campaign resulted in a mix of views. There was some support for the shock tactics used, however, participants stressed the need for these campaigns to be relevant and realistic. Other participants were more critical of this campaign with one person in Melbourne suggesting that the campaign focused too heavily on the consequences of drinking irresponsibly and not enough on the reasons behind why people drink. Another participant in Melbourne felt that young people often ignore campaigns such as this, because they imply that every time you drink too much something bad will happen and when this does not turn out to be the case, the message is lost.

Excessive alcohol consumption was also linked with boredom, an issue also considered to be a factor contributing to violence. Many participants reported that there are limited activities to engage young people, and this lack of engagement can lead to irresponsible alcohol consumption, altercations and violence.

## ***Education***

Participants felt that a lack of education was a major factor in violent behaviour. Many people felt that specific education programs at schools were needed to help young people understand the consequences of their behaviour and develop alternative conflict management strategies. There was strong support for education of this kind to be implemented early in school and continue through all school years. Early intervention was considered the key.

Many of the locations discussed the topic of bullying and the impact this behaviour has on people. There were a number of stories of the participants themselves, family members or friends who have been bullied and received no help from their school. Many young people reported that they were not aware of any anti-bullying campaigns. Participants who were aware of the policies and programs could relay instances where students had reported bullying incidents to teachers and no action had been taken. There was also significant discussion on the escalating nature of bullying behaviour and the increase in cyber-bullying.

Programs such as 'One Punch Can Kill' in Queensland were viewed in a very positive way. However, some participants were not aware of the program which raised the issue around consistency of implementation. Generally, participants in all locations felt that there needed to be consistency in the delivery of anti-bullying and anti-violence programs across all schools.

Some participants felt that there was also a general lack of teaching of morals and respect for others in schools. There was strong support for more extensive intercultural awareness in education as a way to counter intercultural violence.

## ***Police***

The relationship between young people and the police was raised consistently across the venues. There was general support for the need for improved relationships, and many participants felt that police automatically assume that young people are going to cause trouble. There was strong support for greater education for police about young people, youth issues and youth culture.

While participants acknowledged that it was important to have a police presence in the community, many participants felt that young people were often targeted by police. In youth oriented locations, police presence was often viewed as more invasive than supportive. Some participants, however, reported a need for a increased police presence in their local communities.

Many young people felt that the focus should be on creating opportunities for positive interactions between the police and young people. There was support across a number of venues for police to regularly meet with young people at schools, as current involvement was infrequent and too formal. It was felt that the police should come more than one or twice a year in an informal capacity, simply interacting with the students. One participant in Darwin reported the positive impact that a police officer was having by coming to their school every few days to simply sit with the students at lunch time and talk with them about general issues.

There was a general consensus that young people needed to feel that police were more approachable, particularly in situations where they felt unsafe.

## ***The role of mixed media***

The role of media in the portrayal and normalisation of violence was discussed at all of the venues. The "glorification" of violence in the media and through television was seen as a contributor to the cultural acceptance of violence. Many participants felt that violence was legitimised through sports coverage, movies and television. There was also support for the idea that media glorifies some people with criminal histories and the message transmitted to young people is that violence is acceptable.

There were mixed views on the need for greater censoring of violent material in the media and on television. Some participants felt that there should be greater control of the programs and the times they are shown. Others, however, felt that violence in television, games and movies was not a contributing factor, and the coverage of local and world events by the media was often more violent. In Brisbane there was discussion of the idea that life now is not more violent, rather, the issue is that people are more exposed to what is going on through the media and television.

Many participants also felt that young people were over represented in the media as the perpetrators of violent behaviour, when more often than not they are the victims as well. There was support for more youth-friendly media coverage.

### ***Youth spaces and services***

The lack of youth services was seen as a contributing factor to disruptive and violent behaviour, as well as general safety concerns. Many young people reported they either had no knowledge of existing youth services or if they did, these services were often operated by religious organisations, and therefore many young people did not consider them accessible to all youth.

There was support across all locations for an increase in youth services, particularly to help young people to deal with issues such as substance abuse, emotional, physical and sexual abuse, homelessness and unemployment. Young people also wanted the development of safe youth spaces - environments created for young people, designed by young people.

### ***Boredom***

Boredom was seen to be a contributing factor to violent behaviour. Many participants across the ten locations reported that there are not enough activities for young people, and that young people become bored quickly. The lack of engaging activities was seen to increase the risk of violent behaviour, particularly if alcohol and drugs are involved.

Many young people suggested an increase in the number of youth events and activities. There was also emphasis on youth events that are organised and run by young people. It was felt that a way to curb the level of violence was to have young people become more involved and engaged in their communities. Many young people felt there were no regular youth friendly safe places to go to and 'hang out'.

### ***Families/Parenting***

The influence of parents and families on the behaviour of young people and acceptance of violent behaviour was also discussed. It was felt by some participants that parent's actions can shape a young person's view on what is acceptable behaviour and that parents had an important role to play in teaching their children ways to handle conflict. Some participants felt that parents themselves need to be better educated in handling conflict.

### ***Transport***

An issue raised in many locations related to public transport, or the lack of public transport. Many participants reported that they felt unsafe on public transport, particularly at night, and that train stations are too isolated and security is not adequate. The lack of transport at night, and the cost of taxis were also discussed. Young people are often forced to wait at bus and train stations or taxi ranks for long periods of time, increasing the risk of being involved in violent behaviour. There was support for a taxi discount scheme for young people, increasing the number of trains and buses at night times and greater levels of security.

## ***Key Themes from 'Host your own Forum'***

'Host your own Forum' was suggested by the AYF Youth Engagement Steering Committee, as a way to enable young people who were not able to attend **youTHINK** to participate in the discussion. Information was provided on the AYF website on how to host your own forum, including background information on the discussion topics. The main themes from these discussions are outlined below.

- It was felt that violence in Australia was largely related to alcohol. Some participants supported an increase in the legal drinking age and the adoption of an 'American style' system, where young people can receive their drivers licence earlier, but are legally unable to drink until much later. However, it was also felt that simply restricting alcohol would not address the issue as young people would find access to alternative means, such as homemade alcohol and drugs.
- There was strong support for the need for better education of young people about personal safety. This was seen as a positive way to address these issues and to help young people make safer choices.
- Bullying was also seen as a major problem. It was felt that more education was needed for 'known' bullies in schools to specifically target their behaviour. Participants also discussed the adoption of a buddy system to ensure that younger people are supported by those from more senior years. There was

also a call for a national anti-bullying program, to ensure consistency between schools and education sectors.

- Related to this is the issue of cyber-bullying. This was considered a major issue for young people today and it was suggested that there needs to be greater education on this issue and how to address it. Participants supported the need for tighter controls; to more effectively 'block' people by using filtering or editing of posts. There was also support for stronger penalties for offenders.
- There was some support for the need to address the level and type of violence in video games and in movies. It was also felt that the media inaccurately portrays young people's involvement in violence.
- Participants reported that they particularly feel unsafe on public transport. There was general concern about the lack of security on transport and the fact that incidences of violence are sometimes not stopped, even if there is security or an adult presence.
- It was felt that much of the violence occurred due to cultural differences and more needed to be done by community leaders to address this issue.

## ***Key Themes from 'Have a Say' – Violence and Safety, and Bullying***

To give all young Australians the opportunity to provide their thoughts, ideas and suggestions to the Government, the **youTHINK** topics were also provided for online discussion. The 'Have A Say' discussion board on 'Violence and Safety' opened prior to the **youTHINK** event and closed on 23 March 2009. The AYF also conducted an online discussion on the topic of bullying from 2 October 2008 to 13 December 2008. The key themes from these online discussions are below.

### ***Violence and Safety***

The discussion on violence and safety produced similar themes to the discussions held at the **youTHINK** event and from the 'Host your own Forums'. The main ideas from this discussion are outlined below.

- The video/computer game rating system needs to be brought in line with the movie rating system to ensure consistency.
- Parents and families have a major role in young people's attitudes towards violence. Parents need to be better educated on how to deal with conflict.
- There needs to be more activities for young people; boredom can lead to violence.
- Young people need to be better educated on cultural differences and on different conflict management strategies.
- Many young people feel unsafe on public transport; an increase in security is needed.
- There needs to be a greater focus on teaching responsible drinking and a review of drinking laws, including opening hours of pubs and clubs. The legal drinking age should be reviewed.
- There needs to be harsher penalties for perpetrators of violence.
- Bullying, including cyber-bullying and racism, are of great concern to young people. More needs to be done in schools to address these issues.

### ***Bullying***

Many young people expressed their own personal stories in relation to the bullying topic, and a great number of these cases involved not only mental abuse but physical violence. There was also a strong opinion that the recent emergence of cyber-bullying is something that needs to be addressed and that there should be harsher penalties for bullying perpetrators. Some of the other main ideas are outlined below.

- Bullying type behaviours are destructive and can have an impact on a person's wellbeing both immediately and well into their adult life.
- People bully because it makes them feel powerful, stand out, or in some cases gain popularity.
- Some bullies may be angry or sad about something that has happened to them, and they try to take their anger out on someone else.

- Bullies normally target people who lack self confidence or may be seen as 'different' due to their looks, likes or beliefs.
- Bullying does not only occur in schools, many young people have encountered bullying in their workplaces as well.
- There should be a zero tolerance of bullying and there should be harsher penalties for perpetrators.
- Therapy should be provided for both the victim and the perpetrator of bullying. Therapy could help get to the reason why a person chooses to bully and work towards changing this behaviour.
- Young people should be taught more about self confidence, mental disorders, and about accepting that all people are different and that we need to respect those differences. There should be ongoing education (not just a one of presentation) in both primary and secondary schools.
- More needs to be done to stop the emerging culture of cyber-bullying

## ***youTHINK – Ideas for the Future***

During the **youTHINK** event, a number of ideas and suggestions were made on how to address the issue of violence and safety.

1. Further work needs to be undertaken on the relationship between alcohol abuse and behaviour. There needs to be a greater focus on the reasons for binge drinking and the development of better education programs for young people.
2. School wide education programs on violence and safety need to be introduced. There needs to be a specific focus on early intervention, with education programs beginning in primary school and continuing throughout secondary school. These programs should focus on conflict handling techniques and should challenge the cultural acceptance of violence.
3. Education programs need to be consistent across schools and anti-bullying policies need to be consistently enforced.
4. There needs to be a greater focus on the development of positive relationships between police and young people. Police training needs to include specific education on young people and their culture.
5. Regular, positive interactions between police and young people through schools should be introduced. This interaction should be more than a couple of times per year and needs to be informal and fun.
6. There needs to be greater control over the portrayal of violence and levels of violence shown in the media, on television and in movies.
7. Encouragement should be given for the inclusion of positive youth-friendly stories in the media.
8. Establishment of more youth services and better promotion of existing youth services is required, particularly in regional and rural communities.
9. An investment is needed in youth-friendly, secure public spaces. These environments should be designed by young people, for young people.
10. More regular youth events should be organised that are run by young people.
11. Conflict management education programs for parents are important.
12. Increased public transport at night times, increased security on public transport and at trains stations, bus interchanges and taxi ranks is required. A young person's taxi concession scheme should be developed.