



Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth
Working together to enhance the wellbeing and life chances of children and young people.

Preventing Youth Violence Project

*A project of the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)
aimed at reducing the level of violent and antisocial behaviour
among young people in Australia*

Concerns about youth violence

Young people are at greater risk of being violent and of being a victim of violence.

- One in ten young people aged 15-19 and one in twelve 20-24 year olds say they have recently been the victim of an assault – most assaults are not reported to the police.¹

Young males are especially at risk

- 29% of young males aged 18-19 years report having recently been physically assaulted by another male, compared to 15% of males aged 20-24, and only 4% of older males aged 25 and over.²

The level of youth violence is increasing

- From 1997 to 2007, the number of young people charged with assault rose by 48%.³

There is a high price to pay

- Just under half of all assaults result in injury.
- In 2005, more than 20,000 Australians required hospital treatment following an assault, two-thirds of them had a head injury⁴.
- The Australian Institute of Criminology (2009) estimates that assault costs the Australian community \$1.4 billion each year (including medical costs, lost output and intangible costs such as fear, pain and suffering but not including the costs of insurance, compensation, security, policing etc).

What will make a difference?

A number of the factors associated with youth violence are known:

- many different factors are involved (such as those relating to the individual, their family, friends, school, neighbourhood, community, society, culture)
- different factors interact differently in different social, physical and built environments to produce different outcomes.

There is no single cause and no simple solution. There are, however, particular influences that are known to either increase or decrease the risks.

¹ ABS (2006) Crime and Safety, Australia, Table 11

² ABS (2008) Australian Social Trends, Risk taking by young people. P.5

³ Australian Institute of Criminology (2008) Australian Crime: Facts and Figures, p. 59

⁴ AIHW (2008) Hospital separations due to injury and poisoning 2004-05

Young people are especially vulnerable due to major changes occurring in many areas of their life from early adolescence onwards.

Changes in the brain during adolescence affect:

- how young people think and feel (including how they respond to stress, how they regulate their emotions and how they interpret emotions in others)
- how they behave (including increases in risk-taking behaviours)
- how they respond to environmental influences (both good and bad).

Good nutrition is important for brain development and for emotional regulation, yet many young people have a poor diet.

Alcohol has a more extreme effect on the brain and behaviour of adolescents than it does on adults, yet increasing numbers of young people are drinking high levels of alcohol at younger ages.

- One in nine 12-13 year old boys and one in eleven 12-13 year old girls admit to having engaged in binge drinking in the previous two weeks.⁵

Research shows:

- It is more effective and much cheaper to **intervene early** to prevent problem behaviours developing or progressing (yet many strategies try to control or punish rather than prevent violent behaviour).
- **Early adolescence is a critical stage** of development that has consequences for a young person's long term social adjustment and behaviour (yet many youth policies and programs don't start until the age of 12, i.e. a couple of years after changes have already started occurring in the adolescent brain).
- Strategies that **integrate evidence** from across different disciplines and **mobilise collaborative action** across sectors are most effective (yet many policies, programs and services focus on only one dimension of the young person's life).
- There is a substantial body of evidence on what works, and what doesn't work, in preventing youth violence (yet many policies and programs are not based on the evidence).

ARACY's **Preventing Youth Violence** project seeks to incorporate the principles outlined above i.e. focusing on early intervention with young adolescents and applying evidence-based strategies from across relevant disciplines to mobilise effective action across diverse sectors.

An opportunity for action

Taking action that will have a major impact on reducing the level of violent and antisocial behaviour among Australians is the ultimate aim of ARACY's **Preventing Youth Violence** project. However, the project is still in the early stages of development and further work is required to ensure that any action taken is based on the best available evidence.

⁵ Williams et al (2009) Violent and antisocial behaviour among young adolescents in Australia; an analysis of risk and protective factors