



Youth Off The Streets
Response to the National Conversation:
Towards a National Strategy for Young Australians
Discussion Paper November 2009

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Introduction and Background

Youth Off The Streets has been providing services to assist homeless and disadvantaged youth since 1991.

We believe that in order to break the cycle of disadvantage, abuse and neglect, all young people need to be provided with the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

Youth Off The Streets works in partnership with young people to develop their strengths and their ability to make positive life choices. We do this by providing education, rehabilitation, accommodation, counseling, early intervention and other opportunities to learn valuable life skills.

It is our aim that young people will leave our care equipped with the knowledge, skills and confidence to make a positive contribution to society.

OUR YOUNG PEOPLE NEED ACTION NOW

Youth Off The Streets provides this response to the National Conversation – Towards a National Strategy for Young Australians after consultation with young people accessing our services and including almost 20 years of service delivery to some of Australia’s most disadvantaged and marginalised young people.

While Youth Off The Streets applaud the government for committing to develop a National Strategy for Youth, we must emphasise that the time for conversation has lapsed, our young people are in trouble and need urgent action **NOW**.

- One in three girls will be sexually assaulted. One in eight boys will be sexually assaulted.¹
- Over 263,000 children in Australia live with family violence, with about 181,200 children witnessing domestic violence.²
- Almost 20,000 children are victims of physical or sexual assault each year.³
- Over 412,000 Australian children are living below the most austere poverty line.⁴
- Almost 65,000 children are homeless or at risk of homelessness.⁵
- In Australia today, over 78,000 children live in a household where there is at least one daily cannabis user.⁶
- In Australia today, over 27,000 children live in a household where an adult is using methamphetamines monthly.⁷
- On any given night, one in two young people are turned away from crisis accommodation.⁸

¹ Child Wise Fact Sheet: www.childwise.net/downloads/About_Sexual_Abuse.pdf

² Access Economics, *The Cost of Domestic Violence to the Australian Economy*, PADV October 2004

³ *A picture of Australia's children*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009

⁴ Australia Fair 2007, *A fair go for all Australians: International Comparisons, 2007*; Social Policy Research Centre

⁵ *A picture of Australia's children*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009

⁶ *Australian National Council on Drugs Report (2008)*

⁷ *Australian National Council on Drugs Report (2008)*

⁸ *Australia's Homeless Youth*, National Youth Council 2008

The abuse, neglect and abandonment that we read about in our communities are what consign the human spirit to darkness.

When we see troubled kids, we begin the journey to understand the quality of their early relationships, the psychological condition of their inner life and the development of their spirit. At the heart of the matter is whether a young child is connected rather than abandoned, accepted rather than rejected and nurtured, rather than neglected and abused.

The Australian Government's Role in creating a National Strategy for Young People:

In 1990 the then Federal Government signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. But we must ask ourselves, have we lived up to our commitment or is it purely a symbolic one? The current government should consider the development of the National Strategy for Young People in the light of the UN Convention and ensure that Australia can truly align with and support the goals of the convention.

It is imperative that the Australian Government recognises and acknowledges the number of young people in Australia today who are currently being, or are at risk of being sexually, physically, psychologically abused and/or neglected. This acknowledgement must take place in order for there to be a change in culture across our nation.

Through public leadership the Australian Government can be the driving force behind a National Strategy that results in a culture change across every section of our society. **The Government must make sure that every adult in our Nation realises their personal responsibility towards the care and protection of every young person.**

1. The Government can assist youth by FOCUSING ON PREVENTION OF SEXUAL ABUSE AND CHILD PRONOGRAPHY

- Sexual assault needs to be tackled as one of the worst public health problems facing Australia. **1 in 3 girls and 1 in 8 boys** are victims of sexual assault in Australia today.
- 95% of abuse to children is done by people who are well known to the young person. Those looking after children need to be given the tools so that they know how to protect their children. We must educate and alert parents. By the time kids present to welfare agencies, they have already been abused.
- Young people need to be educated about the support services available to sufferers of Domestic Violence and/or abuse. They need to be educated that domestic violence and sexual abuse is not appropriate behaviour in any family.
- While targeting carers of young people with prevention strategies, we need to urgently also target our young people themselves. This can be achieved by developing a National Child Protection and Safety curriculum that would bridge all levels of schooling. This program must emphasise reality, rather than just “stranger danger”, so that our young people can recognise

potential sexual abuse before it occurs and know how to get help quickly, if and when it does occur.

- Paedophilia has reached epidemic proportions with some experts calling it Australia's biggest health crisis. Statistics shows 2277 attacks by pedophiles were reported to NSW police in 2007. The average gaol sentence given to 120 pedophiles in 2007 was less than three years, while 48 were let off without a gaol sentence.
- Serious consideration should be given to indeterminate sentencing of people who abuse children. The criminal justice system must provide evidence-based programs for child sex offenders. An offender should only be released if they can prove that they have participated in therapeutic program and dealt with their issues. Serious consideration should be given to cases of repeat offenders and if evidence of rehabilitation is not clear; some should remain incarcerated to protect young people from further abuse.
- Child pornography is not a victimless crime, it is real kids being abused and the demand for such material ensures the practice of child abuse continuing. Owners of such material must be given sentences that reflect their complicity in the production of the material and the seriousness of their crime.
- Our present legal system gives little consideration to the victims. Restorative justice takes a very different approach and gives power back to the victim. We need to look at the restorative justice process as a way of balancing the needs of the victim against the needs of the perpetrator.

2. The Government can assist YOUTH by generating a CULTURE CHANGE

The culture of our government, our legal system and all services operating with our young people must be changed so that they can operate with the understanding that:

- The worth of a young person is greater than their worst act.
- Bad youth are elements of a system. The majority of their unsanctioned behaviour is linked to preventable economic, social, familial, educational, and legal issues.
- Pathologising, criminalising, dehumanizing and demonising troubled youth have proven ineffective as a strategy for achieving lasting positive changes.
- A male positive attitude to troubled boys utilizes compassion, responsibility, fierce challenge, cultural literacy and social inclusion to create therapeutic alliances that can effectively achieve positive change.
- Adults are responsible for the majority of social ills now ascribed to young people. Ignorance not youth is our common enemy.

Our young people are in trouble and we do nothing at our own peril.

We are living in an unprecedented social experiment. Never have so many lived so far from extended family or outside of traditional communities, where adults served as collective parents for all the neighborhoods young people. Never have so many marriages ended in divorce or divided families, or so many elderly been relegated to unfamiliar surroundings. These developments have reduced our social

capital – the relationships that bind people together and create a sense of community. Our Federal and State Governments need to assist communities in finding ways to deal with our profound loss of social connectedness.

3. The Government can assist YOUTH by focusing on YOUTH & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Adults are disconnecting from young people at an alarming rate.

- We need to build infrastructure in communities to bring people together. There are many disadvantaged communities with little or no infrastructure to engage young people in positive activities.
- In Macquarie Fields, one of the NSW Police Local Area Commanders attributed a decrease in juvenile crime of up to 30% to our Community Outreach Program.
- The Government must provide land and support to those organizations willing to build and operate the infrastructure required for community engagement in existing areas of disadvantage.

4. The Government can assist YOUTH by focusing on EDUCATION and EMPLOYMENT

- All young people must be given access to quality education.
- Flexible and alternative models of education need to be accessible to those who cannot thrive in the mainstream.
- Education must lead somewhere. Education is not valued if there are no jobs or meaningful employment to achieve upon completion of schooling. Some statistics on youth disengagement (15 – 24 year olds not engaged in either education or employment) in Blacktown, one of the communities Youth Off The Streets is about to start working with are below:
 - Willmot (32.9%)
 - Bidwill (30.9%)
 - Tregear (30.1%)
 - Lethbridge Park (27.5%)
 - Shalvey (25.6%)

These young people need direction and engagement so that they can lead fulfilling lives by making a positive contribution to society.

- Work experience: In the era of litigation, it has become increasingly difficult to offer young people access to work places to gain first hand experience, knowledge of industries and contacts. A government assisted program that engages employers and offers incentives for them to create work experience opportunities would greatly benefit young school leavers and serve to increase their chances of employment.

5. The Government can assist YOUTH by ENSURING ALL YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE A SAFE PLACE TO SLEEP

Residential Facilities Focus

- There are over 100,000 people living homeless in Australia today. Of these, 36,000 are young people aged between 12-25 years.
- Tonight there will be over 1,000 young people sleeping rough on the streets in Sydney alone.
- One in Two young people are turned away from crisis accommodation every night.
- **Every young person should be able to access safe shelter at all times.**

Lack of access to crisis and medium to long-term accommodation for homeless young people is one of the most significant inhibitors of young people escaping cycles of disadvantage and hopelessness. Government focus on increasing capacity for these young people to sleep safe and secure and transition to long-term supported accommodation and eventually back into the mainstream should be a central focus for any National Strategy for Young People.

6. The Government can assist YOUTH by CHANGING SOCIETAL ATTITUDES towards Multiculturalism and Racism

The Government should acknowledge that we all have prejudices and biases within us that we need to challenge and change.

When ***diversity/multiculturalism*** is emphasized there is a tendency to avoid probing the nature of racism and prejudice, considerable energy is expended in mastering political correctness. As a consequence, the treatment employed to produce racial harmony is at best superficial.

Facing reality is the first step to healing.

Prejudice, ignorance and racism can only be healed when we as human beings look into each other's eyes and acknowledge ***that we are all one family.***

- We are first human, then we are ethnic,
- There is only one race, the human race.
- The idea of race is man's most dangerous myth.

As Australians we must recognise that our British forebears and institutions oppressed and damaged Aboriginal lives. We should also acknowledge the many migrants and refugees in Australia who have fled persecution because of their cultural, religious or ethnic identities. While acknowledging and celebrating the social and psychological importance of ethnic and cultural identities and Indigenous status; we should not lose sight of the need to reinforce our common humanity and the similarities between us all that strengthen our common humanity.

The Government can assist Aboriginal YOUTH by ensuring we DO NOT REPEAT the MISTAKES of the past

Official figures from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare show there are now more than 9000 indigenous children in state care -- a figure that far outstrips the number that were taken in the 1920s and 30s.⁹

Both NSW, with 4316, and Queensland, with 2085, have this year set records for the number of indigenous children taken from their parents. In both states, Aboriginal children are being taken at 10 times the rate of non-Indigenous children. Nationwide, Aboriginal children comprise just 4.4 per cent of all children, and yet make up 24 per cent of all children in care.

Children are being taken today for the exact same reason as they were last century: poverty.

We must unpack the concept of generating another 'stolen generation' for what it really is. The aboriginal stolen generation was not about removing kids from dangerous and abusive environments. Some of those kids needed to be removed from abusive homes and environments. The evil of the aboriginal stolen generation was that it was Government policy, through Legislation, to remove all half caste aboriginal kids and was an act of genocide. Their homes and environment were not assessed and kids were removed from good and caring families. No one would argue against kids being removed from abusive homes.

The Federal Government, having apologised to the stolen generation, must honour its gesture and ensure the mistakes made by past governments are not repeated today.

The Government could work towards preventing the mistakes of the past by:

- Ensuring worthwhile employment is available in areas where Aboriginal communities are situated.
- Ensuring education and training is available so people from Aboriginal communities can work towards employment.
- Ensuring all educational programs respond to cultural ways of engaging young people.
- Ensuring all educational programs introduce young people to their culture and spirituality.
- Understanding that many Aboriginal people are dealing with post-traumatic distress as a result of dispossession of their land and all that followed from this. We must provide proper medical and psychological services to help them deal with this trauma in a culturally sensitive way.
- Young people should not be removed from their communities and land. The Government must ensure young people can be kept safe in their own community. This could be done by having safe houses in the communities and ensuring there is suitable accommodation (not 15 in a two bedroom house – as this is an environment where abuse flourishes.)
- Those who cause abuse must receive counselling to ensure it does not happen again.
- We must create infrastructure in these communities so that young people have the opportunity to be engaged in community and worthwhile activities.

⁹ Catherine Overington, *The Australian*, August 22, 2009

7. The Government can assist YOUTH by acknowledging the DAMAGE ALCOHOL DOES TO YOUNG PEOPLE and the part it plays in PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Rogue traders of the alcohol industry target young people, although they deny it. Binge drinking is at epidemic proportions. The age of young people experiencing alcohol has dropped to 12. A fifth of young people aged between 16-25 drink to intoxication most times that they drink and 42% of young drinkers report memory loss after drinking.

- The alcohol industry cannot be relied on to monitor inappropriate advertising. We need to acknowledge that some alcohol companies target kids with their marketing campaigns and we as a society should ensure the milieu our children live in is cleaned up.
- We need Governments to acknowledge the damage alcohol does to young people and the part it plays in physical and sexual violence.
- Governments should **ban** products that appeal to young people through their naming and labelling. Eg; The Fairy Bomb, Cowboy/Cowgirl and brightly coloured soft drink flavoured alcoholic pre-mixers.
- Marketing of alcohol products during sporting events should be banned before 9 p.m It is a serious anomaly that all advertising of alcohol on television must be after 9 p.m. except when a sporting event is involved.

CONCLUSION

We must accept our responsibility as law makers, law enforcers, service providers, educators, case workers, consumer marketers and most importantly, as adults, to ensure that we are doing our best to protect every one of our Nation's children.

The Federal Government has an opportunity here to act swiftly to improve the lives of ALL our Nation's young people.

Through replicating already existing and successful outreach, education and early intervention programmes, by ensuring that young people and victims of abuse have appropriate care and support both legally and medically, by providing the appropriate support to those given the authority to protect our children, by educating all adults in Australia about their responsibility to our youth and by educating all young people in schools around Australia about their rights and the support that is available to them (especially in the case of sexual abuse) we will deliver our young people the care and protection that we owe them and provide every young person with the best opportunity we can to reach their full potential.