

ULTRA-VIOLENCE

JUVENILE violence is of increasing concern to the community.

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Of course trends in crime — whether they rise or fall — can never remove the emotional trauma and lifelong pain felt by the parents of a child who is killed. The relatives of crime victims suffer psychologically, financially and, sometimes, occupationally in ways that few people realise.

There can be no doubt that crime statistics from around the country show that, increasingly, juveniles are more involved in violent crime of all types. As with other countries in the Western world, Australia has experienced a growth in juvenile crime that concerns governments of all political persuasions.

However, this growth has to be kept in perspective. In homicide, rape, robbery and serious assault cases, juveniles, as a proportion of the total population, are under-represented in arrest figures. These trends are reflected in figures for the ACT although in the Territory there has been a worrying rise in both male and female assault offences.

In general, of all homicide cases around the country, only about six per cent are committed by young people. Those who knife, shoot and beat others are generally not the young but the not-so-young, especially those aged between 18 and 25.

The role of alcohol in youthful crime and young adult crime cannot be underestimated. All the research evidence available indicates that alcohol plays a devastating role in propelling juveniles towards anti-social behaviour.

The highest risk group for traffic crashes are young drivers, especially males aged between 15 and 24 years. Traffic crashes are the largest single cause of death in this age range, both in Australia and overseas, and the overall involvement of young drivers in road crashes is about four times the average for other drivers.

Significantly, the role of alcohol involvement in fatal crashes is highest

among the young. Though, except in road crashes, few young people die from excessive drinking, teenage patterns of alcohol consumption set the stage for heavy drinking in adulthood.

This pattern can be devastating. Recent figures show that 283 people throughout the country died from illegal opiates. That's 283 people too many but not nearly as many as the 3,456 Australians who were killed through the legal drug alcohol.

The role of alcohol in youthful crime was dramatically illustrated to me when I recently observed drunk teenagers kicking an old man in a Sydney railway station. This was a scene very much like one taken from Anthony Burgess's book

'A Clockwork Orange' — later to be made into a major film.

Though Australian cities do not yet feature the chilling scenario of masses of young hooligans inflicting violence just for fun, scenes of young people staggering, lurching and vomiting around our major cities are not good pointers for the future.

What is often forgotten, though, in any discussion on youth crime is the other side of the coin. And, that side is that in terms of physical and sexual abuse, and in many other forms of interpersonal violence, it is the young, far more than the elderly, who are likely to be victims of crime. More than perhaps at any other time in recent history juveniles are being forced from their homes, driven into prostitution or become street kids prone to heavy drug-taking, serious crime and, often, suicide.

Youthful suicide rates are increasing at an alarming rate. The tragic case of two

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teenage boys jumping to their death off the harbour bridge recently illustrates cogently the propensity for young people to voluntarily depart from this world over emotional and interpersonal matters.

This case, and youthful suicide generally, also points to the complex issues involved in dealing with youth problems. On the one hand we cannot excuse juvenile criminals for engaging in violent crimes just because their home lives or their interpersonal relations are disastrous.

On the other hand it should be recognised that a whole complex of factors — high youth unemployment rates, crumbling family structures and rapid technological and social change — are making contemporary society a very much more uncertain place than it was in the past.

There are important contributions that police can make in the juvenile area both in terms of preventing crime and in dealing with welfare issues affecting the young. For example, given the enormous problems caused by teenagers and alcohol no one can argue with police attempts to reduce underage drinking.

Similarly, initiatives such as police talking in schools, honestly and frankly, about crime and social problems, must also be applauded. Whether there should be a move to establish police permanently in schools — as in New South Wales and the Northern Territory — could perhaps be decided after valuations of these programs are completed.

One of the most successful police initiatives in the prevention of juvenile delinquency has been the Queensland police force's juvenile aid bureau. The Federal Police adopt similar procedures. In particular, a discretionary approach towards minor offenders allows police in the Territory to use careful judgment before deciding to charge first offenders.

There is, of course, a limit as to what police can do in the area of juvenile crime. Police officers, like most people in the society generally, have little influence on unemployment rates, family breakdowns, technological change, media violence and a host of other factors that help to determine juvenile violence and juvenile crime.

Police have a very real interest in the questions relating to the sentencing of youthful offenders. After all, it is they who see the result of juvenile destructiveness and it is they who work, often under great pressure, to catch and charge such offenders.

Again, there is no black and white answer in this area. For example, there

has been some discussion in this country about implementing a 'short, sharp shock' regime, modelled perhaps on British detention centres, for juvenile delinquents.

In the United Kingdom this approach became universal in 1985. The problem with these centres, however, is that evaluation studies carried out for those sentenced show that juveniles were not affected by the implementation of these regimes. For example, in one detention centre there was a staggering 57 per cent reconviction rate within one year.

In New York a law that sharply cut back the jurisdiction of the Family Court, sending many violent youthful offenders to criminal court instead, has also failed to deter juvenile crime. The evaluators conclude that for juvenile homicide and assault there was 'no support' for the theory that the law reduced crime.

Importantly though, in case readers consider the researchers were supporting what has often been called a 'bleeding heart' approach to juvenile violence the researchers end up with a warning. 'The findings', they say, 'do suggest that proponents of punishment may be as overly optimistic as have been advocates of treatment'.

On the other hand it is equally futile to argue that institutionalisation for young offenders should never be used. In some of the most provocative and well-researched Australian studies of young people in custody, Geoff Asher, in his book 'Custody and Control', argues quite cogently that the institutional experience may have potentially beneficial consequences.

Asher makes the quite reasonable point that institutions may have a role in the juvenile criminal justice system but only if they are carefully tailored to specific offenders.

In the area of sentencing juveniles, as in most other areas of criminal justice, balance and a wide range of alternative options are needed so that diverse sentencing alternatives are available depending on the background of the offender and the nature of the offence.

Juvenile crime, especially juvenile violence, is a disturbing feature of Australian life. There is also little doubt that young people are more likely now than they were ten years ago, to turn to violence and to inflict it with more intensity.

We should not see this phenomenon as something unique to the present decade. The realities of our turbulent past are that packs of wild young larrikins really did make parts of our cities dangerous to visit, and to live in.

In the 1870s and 1880s the Rocks and the Woolloomooloo areas of Sydney were infested by gangs of young people who fought viciously with razors. In the aftermath of the Great War historians report that large feuding groups of young hooligans roamed everywhere around Melbourne looking for trouble. Similar historical accounts occur in every decade since that time.

Juvenile violence and delinquency is a problem that deserves the attention of all of us. But young people today are not necessarily any worse, as a whole, than were past generations and the actions of a few should not stereotype and reflect on the majority.

Platypus's 'sixth sense'

By CRAIG CORMICK

A TEAM of Australian researchers has proved that the platypus possesses a sixth sense.

The sense, based on a series of electroreceptors in the bill enables the platypus to detect faint electrical impulses, and to navigate in murky water and locate its prey.

The movement of water creates an electric field, as does the motion of a fish or shrimp moving its muscles. The research team, from Monash University, has shown that these electrical impulses can be detected by the platypus's sensors.

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