

Victims, Nuisances or Both?

Changing Protective Services for Young People

Karen Piper and Greg Smith

Working with young people presents some unique challenges for protective services programs. How well equipped are services to meet those challenges? The Burdekin Report on Youth Homelessness graphically illustrates the ways in which both protective services programs and the community at large are failing young people.

One young person's experience of welfare authorities went like this... "they put you in refuges. That's their escape from the subject... But if you've really got a problem they're not (of) very much assistance."

Intervention in the lives of young people has been alternatively described as neglectful, unhelpful, or damaging and punitive.

The growing problems of youth homelessness indicates that previous responses to the problems of young people have been spectacularly unsuccessful. The following raises issues relating to the government's present need to respond.

It is interesting to note from a preliminary pursuit of annual reports from various state government departments, little specific reference is given to issues and programs for adolescents although they roughly occupy between 40% to 50% of the child protection population. A notable exception is South Australia which devotes a service to adolescents at risk.

Departmental staff in Victoria are keen to meet the challenges set out in both the Burdekin Report and presented by young people themselves.

Some of the challenges rest in being able to respond effectively within the constraints of a statutorily based service system; being able to differentiate deeds and needs, looking beyond a problem behaviour focus in case practice, and finally confronting community attitudes towards young people which are largely negative (media highlighting incidents of vandalism, drug and alcohol abuse, prostitution and street violence).

Karen Piper and Greg Smith are engaged in programme development work in Child Protection for Community Services Victoria, 115 Victoria Parade, Melbourne 3002. This paper was presented at the National Child Protection Conference in Sydney 1990.

PROTECTIVE RESPONSES TO YOUNG PEOPLE

Historically, the focus of protective services was in the abuse and neglect of children. Young people, adolescents and teenagers have been generally viewed as being responsible for their own circumstances (Lindley, 1989). Those coming to the attention of the state typically had the police as the first contact.

This has been the case in Victoria where until recently police and the state department responsible for community services have shared responsibility equally for protective intervention, operating what is known as the dual track system.

Initially, the Children's Protection Society and from 1985, Community Services Victoria (CSV) directed their pre-court intervention toward younger children whilst police assumed responsibility for the adolescent age group. This long-standing division of responsibility reflects the way the police role is viewed by the community in Victoria, the high visibility of young people and the often crisis nature of intervention in their lives.

The number of protection applications issued by police (Fig. 1) compared to CSV (Fig. 2) illustrates these differences. The different work practices of CSV protective teams and police also lead to a high level of short-term institutionalisation of young people, with an emphasis on behaviour control or management rather than identification of issues of need.

ABUSE AND NEGLECT OF YOUNG PEOPLE

A factor that often escapes professionals and the community at large is that young people are subject to the same forms of abuse and neglect as younger children, and that this is harmful to them. They are beaten, neglected, sexually violated and subject to emotionally traumatising experiences. They represent a major component of case-loads of protective workers. For example in the United States, adolescents constitute 25-50% of a substantiated cases of abuse and neglect (Fisher et al 1980, Burgdard 1980, Garbarino and Garbarino 1982).

In Victoria, young people of 13 years and over make up 42% of protective services

clients subject to a supervision or wardship order. This group has been as high as 50% of the client population. Despite this, past training has provided minimal preparation for protective workers in understanding and effectively working with the abused young person and dealing with the complex dynamic of developmental challenges combined with their responses to the experience of abuse.



UNDER-REPORTING OF ABUSE AND NEGLECT OF YOUNG PEOPLE

The Burdekin Report refers to Homelessness as often being "an option forced upon neglected and abused children by the failure of State Welfare Authorities to intervene, either at all or adequately" (Burdekin 1989: 93). A survey of 20 young women placed at the Winlaton Youth Training Centre in Victoria indicated that more than half had experienced sexual abuse. For some of those young women the allegations had not been followed up. When confronted with a challenging, acting out adolescent, how good are people at identifying and responding to the underlying needs issues? Are they taken seriously?

It is believed that a significant proportion

of abuse and neglect of young people goes unreported. What is the reason for this? Does it reflect an historical and professional emphasis on protective services as being 'child focussed'? Is there difficulty in getting disclosures where typical responses to sexual abuse is shame, fear, disbelief by others or blaming for being sexually provocative? Is it believed that adolescents can fight back so physical abuse is less likely to be life threatening? Is there a general belief that adolescents are able to 'look after themselves'?

(Schellenbeck and Guerney 1987, Garbarino and Garbarino 1982, Fisher et al 1980)

RESPONDING TO BEHAVIOUR

The confusion between acting out behaviours and needs often leads to a failure to protect and support young people, exacerbates the problem and denies them access to effective and appropriate intervention.

The inappropriate intervention will be directed at the behaviour such as running away, conflict in the home or offending and becomes translated into an exercise of limit setting or achieving control over the young person. In the view of the writers, these strategies invariably fail in the longer term, even though they may contain the problem behaviour in the short-term.

IMPLICATIONS OF YOUTH HOMELESSNESS FOR PROTECTIVE SERVICES

As indicated above, the 'Burdekin' Report, and the 'Forced Exit' report on homeless young people in Victoria have provided detailed documentation on the circumstances of homeless young people. Several common themes have emerged.

1. Chronic youth homelessness often originates in abuse, neglect or significant conflict in the family home. 34% of the 'Forced Exit' sample left home because of physical abuse. That 43% of young women in the sample were sexually abused is most concerning. The relationship between sexual abuse, running away and adolescent prostitution is also well documented (Seng 1989, Stiffman 1989).
2. The protective responses to homeless young people is often inadequate.

The message is ambiguous in that criticisms of state intervention swing between it being overly coercive or prematurely withdrawing support.

Generally, issues related to accommodation, income security, education and employment are not successfully addressed, in spite of being integral to the development and survival of young people.

In Victoria, as is the case elsewhere, the use of institutions has played a major part in the past in the behaviour management of

young people. Their potential for compounding damage on the development of social skills, and independence has been recognised. In contrast to activity reported by other states Victoria has retained a significant institutional component in its protective services system. Steps have been taken to reduce the size of institutions and limiting opportunities for such behaviour management strategies.

The prevalence of institutions more than

symbolises general community attitudes and expectations. As a community we are uncomfortable about the visibility of sexual activity, drug taking, running away and other so called acting out behaviours and want an immediate response that ensures containment. Many parents experiencing a loss of control over their children view containment as necessary, and it alleviates their immediate anxiety believing that at least the young person is safe! This rationale

FIGURE 1.
POLICE PROTECTION APPLICATIONS (VICTORIA)

Jan to June 1989

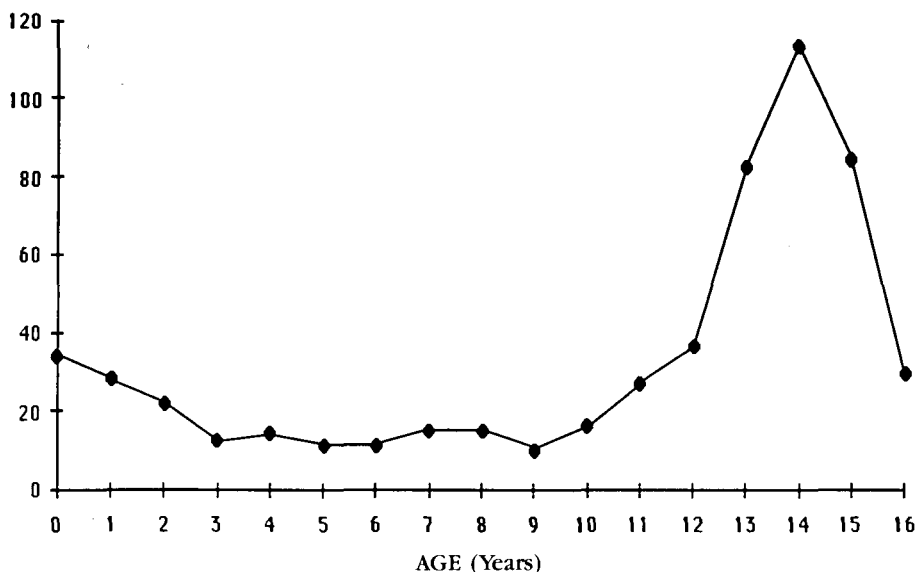
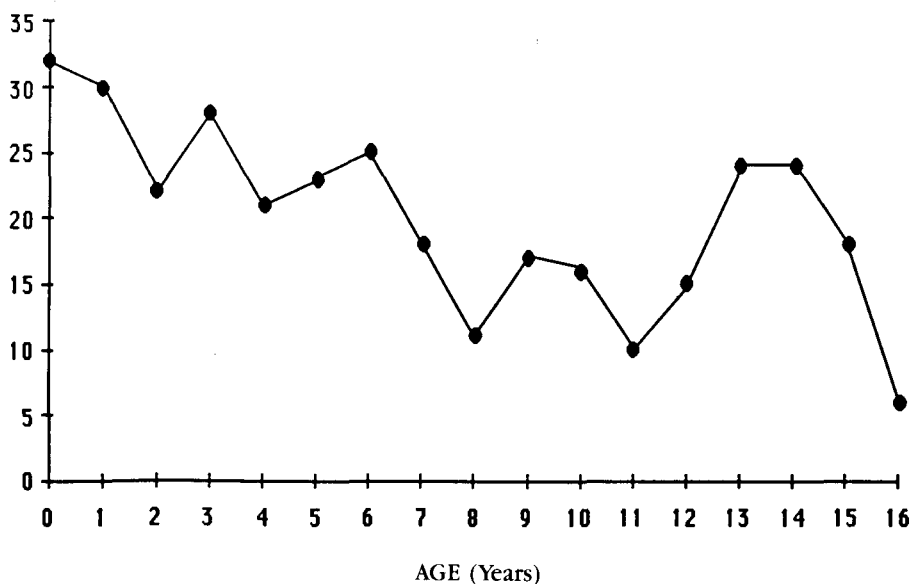


FIGURE 2.
CSV PROTECTION APPLICATIONS (VICTORIA)

Jan to June 1989



may be promoted by the media, politicians, and is taken on board by many professionals in the protective services network. To be fair it also reflects an absence of sufficient viable options. A number of services do not have staff sufficiently skilled to work effectively with young people.

POSITIVE RESPONSES TO 'ACTING OUT' BEHAVIOUR

When re-framed, 'acting out' is not simply seen as a challenge to society, but representing a clear indicator of need and providing an opportunity to intervene in a relevant and supportive way.

Running away should be viewed as a positive and empowered response to abuse. Would the community prefer young people to remain in an abusive situation?

There is evidence to suggest that passive recipients of abuse are in more danger of long-term personal and emotional damage than the victim who votes with their feet, or responds in other voluble and visible ways and draws attention to their situation, (Fisher et al 1980).

When re-framed, 'acting out' is not simply seen as a challenge to society, but representing a clear indicator of need and providing an opportunity to intervene in a relevant and supportive way.

IMPROVING THE RELEVANCE OF PROTECTIVE SERVICES

PROFESSIONAL AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION

A major task is to actively promote the issues facing young people, in the community at large. This involves targeting both the general public and relevant professional groups to improve their understanding of the impact of abuse and neglect on young people, and engage their support in developing alternative strategies. This would mean increased support for the development of new programs and a more effective practice response.

Shorter term strategies already undertaken involve the production of a magazine aimed at young people in the style of the 'Streetwise Comics', and posters for use in public transport. Professional groups being targeted at present are teachers and doctors.

STRENGTHENING THE PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

Protective work with young people requires a capacity to understand and engage not only parents, but the young person and their relevant networks.

Workers should have the skills and knowledge to respond to issues arising from:

- abuse commencing both during childhood and at adolescence, its differing impact and consequences for the young person.
- behaviours that arise from abusive situations or neglect, and differentiate them from emerging independence.
- the impact of the young person's behaviour on their family.
- the particular needs for personal support that young people from disrupted families require.
- the ways in which young people may put themselves at risk in the community.

THE NOTION OF DEFENSIBLE RISK

In line with developing a positive practice orientation in working with young people and minimising coercive oriented responses such as incarceration there has emerged considerable debate around the notion of 'defensible risk'.

This concept was developed by Danny Sandor formerly of the Street Work Outreach Project in Melbourne, and relates to the level of risk to be tolerated before coercive intervention should be considered. In States where secure care facilities are obsolete this debate may seem slightly irrelevant. However, what can occur of course is that 'at risk' young people become channelled into the offending stream or juvenile justice system – masking the risk issues at stake.

All decisions related to the assessment and management of child abuse and neglect within families relate primarily to judgements about the likelihood of harm occurring to the child, and identification of a strategy or plan to minimise that harm or risk of harm.

Integral to adolescent development is the taking of risks that may or may not lead to serious harm occurring. Specific behaviors of young people that excite fear about harm range from staying out late, sexual activity, running away to potential and actual drug abuse, suicidal and violent behaviour.

Central to the argument is that some interventions, are more damaging or harmful than the problem initially identified. These include locking up kids, undermining their potential for development into adulthood and undermining opportunities for providing help which is supportive and constructive for the young person concerned.

Another aspect of this is the despair often felt by workers about the acting out of young people. Workers need support from their organisation in persevering in the face of risky situations and avoiding the expedient coercive responses.

Workers need help to withstand community pressure which expects speedy solutions to complex problems that have been developing over long periods of time.

The skills required of workers in this

context draw a great deal on a capacity to engage, persist, negotiate and fully appreciate their standing in the eyes of young people, as government employed 'welfare' workers. This has a particular impact on the dynamic that will operate in the relationship between the protective worker and the young person.

STRATEGIES FOR INTERVENTION

SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE WITHIN THEIR FAMILIES

With assistance, many people subject to abuse and neglect can be successfully protected and supported within their own family.

Many families actually have difficulty dealing with the challenges presented by their adolescent members and the actual change within the family brought about by the adolescents growth toward independence. The difficulty for the parent may also be in dealing with their own life changes, sometimes referred to as 'middlescence' (Fisher et al 1980).

These conflicts can be dealt with by counselling and support and other problem-solving techniques (Garbarino and Garbarino 1982, Fisher et al 1980, Kelley et al 1989, and Schellenbeck and Guernsey 1987).

In the cases where young people 'run away' from home for these reasons, the speedy return home of the young person with the provision of intensive support can be effective. The longer young people are away from home the more difficult it is to achieve successful reunion (Thorpe 1988).

SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE COMMUNITY

When abuse and neglect is of a long term nature or represents a significant or 'high risk' to the young person, the likelihood of adequate protection being achieved within the family is poor. (Garbarino and Garbarino 1982, Garbarino et al 1986).

The Forced Exit survey concluded that young women had been returned to abusing parents without adequate protection. The report points to insensitivity to sexual abuse, simplistic responses in the context of a strong policy commitment to family reunification and a lack of accommodation options as being major influences.

Irrespective of judgements of case-workers regarding the adequacy and viability of the family unit, in the event that a young person refuses to return home there is little that encouragement of offers of family support can achieve.

The issue becomes one of the rights of the young person in relation to those of the parents (Lindley 1989) and a practical approach to supporting the young person in the community.

DO GOVERNMENTS AVOID INTERVENTION?

The 'Burdekin' Report concluded that the care and protection required by many young people was denied due to the restrictive use of guardianship options, without alternative supports being provided.

Whilst this may have relevance, it is important to clarify the role of statutory intervention.

In the Victorian context at least, changes in policy regarding intervention have arisen due to changing community expectations about the need to minimise family intervention based on young people's social status: in particular the gender bias against young women (Bryson and Edwards 1988).

Yet Community Services Victoria currently retains a high proportion of adolescent clients (table 1) and apparently a major proportion of homeless young people (Hirst 1989). The issue therefore is not whether government services are willing to intervene, rather the nature and effectiveness of the services provided.

Whilst the appropriate exercise of statutory powers in protecting children and young people within their family is clearly required, the value of coercive intervention with young people living independently in the community has serious shortcomings and consequences. Herein lies a challenge in achieving a better deal for the young people in Victoria and steps are being taken to deal with it. How is the rest of Australia responding to these issues?

REFERENCES

Bryson L. and Edwards A. (1988), "Gender, Social Control and Community Services, *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, 24 (3).

Burgdorff K. (1980), *Recognition & Reporting of Child Maltreatment: Findings from the National Incidence & Severity of Child Abuse & Neglect*. National Centre on Child Abuse & Neglect, Washington, D.C.

Fisher B., Berdie J., Cook J. and Day N. (1980), *Adolescent Abuse & Neglect: Intervention Strategies*, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

Fogarty and Sargeant D. (1989), *Protective Services for Children in Victoria: An Interim Report*, Community Services Victoria, Australia.

Garbarino J. and Garbarino A. (1982), *Maltreatment of Adolescents*, National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse (U.S.A.).

Stiffman A.I. (1989), 'Physical & Sexual Abuse in Runaway Youths', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 13.

Garbarino J., Schellenbach C., Sebes I. and Associates (1986), *Troubled Youth, Troubled Families: Understanding Families at Risk for Adolescent Maltreatment*, New York, Aldine.

Hirst C. (1989), *Forced Exit: A Profile of the Young & Homeless in Inner Melbourne*, Salvation Army Youth Homelessness Policy Development Project, Melbourne, Australia.

Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission (1989), *Our Homelessness Children: Report of the National Inquiry into Homelessness Children*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.


Lindley R., 'Teenagers and Other Children' in Scarre G., (Ed) *Children, Parents and Politics* (1989), Cambridge.

Schellambach C., and Guernsey L., (1987), Identification of Adolescent Abuse & Future Intervention Prospects, *Journal of Adolescence*, 10.

Seng M., 'Child Sexual Abuse & Adolescent Prostitution: A Comparative Analysis (1989), *Adolescence* 14, (95).

Thorpe J., 'Career Patterns in child Care - Implications for Service (1988), *British Journal of Social Work*, 18 (2).

	Data	Total	Age	Number	%
Victoria	Protection Applications 1989	1960	10 +	1091	55%
			13 +	878	45%
	Protective Orders 30.06.89	3974	10 +	2253	57%
			13 +	1679	42%



THE NINTH INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT
 30 August - 3 September, 1992
 Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A.
 400N Michigan Avenue, Suite 2300
 Chicago, Illinois 60611, U.S.A.
 Tel: 312 644 5997 Fax: 312 644 7951

Clive Roxburgh Memorial National Child Safety Library

The Royal Children's Hospital Safety Centre has established a Child Safety Library thanks to the generosity of Mrs Joan Roxburgh who donated funds in honour of her late husband Clive. Mr and Mrs Roxburgh have been long-term friends of the hospital.

A librarian was appointed in January 1989 and the library was officially opened in July 1989. It is a national resource for child safety literature from Australia and overseas covering medical literature and literature from other disciplines such as architecture, engineering, sociology and psychology. Material in various formats is being collected including books, journals, journal articles, conference proceedings, reports, legislation, standards, statistics and teaching programs.

Because road safety literature is covered so extensively by the Australian Road Research Board, Vic Roads and similar state bodies, the library concentrates on all other areas of child safety including drowning, burns and scalds, falls, poisoning, choking and suffocation, sports injuries and safety products designed to prevent injury, although some transport safety literature is included.

The library produces a quarterly current awareness bulletin, *Child Safety Library News*, which is available on a subscription basis.

The library's next project is to create a database of child safety information utilising the computer software program BOOK to make the resources more accessible to users. This requires additional funding.

The library is located in the Royal Children's Hospital Safety Centre, Flemington Road, Parkville, Victoria 3052. It is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday.

For further information please contact the Librarian, Jan Shield, on (03) 345 6470 or the Centre's Administrator, Brigid Nossal on (03) 345 5085 or Fax (03) 345 8421.