Reducing Violence through Community-based Programs: A case for PeaceBuilders®

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Introduction

On a comparative basis, Australia does not rate that highly on the international list of 'violent societies'. There is no overt or covert warfare currently occurring within or across its borders, for example; it is relatively free from terrorist activity; the rate of firearm-related homicide is 0.4 per 100,000 population compared to 0.7 in Canada and 6.3 in the USA (ABS Causes of Death, 1994). But at the same time, the rate of firearm-related homicide is higher than in the UK (0.1 per 100,000 population), there were 519 firearm-related deaths in Australia in 1994; there have been 24 known mass killings in Australia since 1987; and in 1995, over 100,000 people were the victims of some form of assault in Australia. Further, if the definition of violence is broadened to include racism, sexism, family violence or abuse, unemployment or alienation, bullying either in the school yard

or in organisations and institutions, then there are very few Australians who lead lives without violence impinging upon their daily interactions to some extent. It is important to accept that violence may not result directly in personal injury, but may serve to reduce the overall quality of life and that fear of violence may equally impact upon well-being.

For all the definitions or comparative statistics, there is a growing perception amongst increasing numbers of Australians, that Australian society is a violent society and that violence is both endemic and systemic. Moreover, it is a country that has a long history of violence rooted in its colonial past. There are numerous indicators. For example, although there were 332 homicides in Australia in 1994, there were also 2258 suicides; over 2000 people died that year in violent deaths on Australia's roads; there are growing debates about levels of violence on TV, in films and videos and in video/arcade games; and there are fears that more children are manifesting more violent tendencies at earlier ages. Building on the assumption that Australian society is essentially a violent society, the purpose of this paper is three-fold. First, to draw together from differing sources some examples of types of violence in order to illustrate the extend of violence and to better understand the phenomenon. Second, to utilise these examples to explore approaches to the reduction or prevention of violence. Finally, to examine, in detail, one particular approach to the reduction or prevention of violence, namely the PeaceBuilders® program.

Violence and Education

In terms of exploring violence, the education sector offers a range of excellent examples, both from the schooling (an institutional perspective) as well as from the perspective of organisational and systemic violence. For the purposes of this paper, school violence and school-related crimes are utilised as over-arching, intertwined concepts.

Schools are frequently used as barometers of levels of anti-social behaviours. American public schools have long been held to reflect the drift into ever increasing levels of social violence and crime. Lurid stories, not always substantiated or substantiable, appear from time to time in the media. For example, the following appeared in the Economist (Nov 1991):

"Weapons are common-place in New York's 120 public high schools. Of the 3843 serious incidents reported in New York schools in the latest academic year, 2170 involved weapons possession."

But, it would appear that the trend in violence in US schools has been on the increase for some years. Two major inquiries in 1964 (Coleman, et al) and in 1978 (US Department Health, Education and Welfare) were stimulated by concern about rising levels of violence of schools. More recently, a study by Haas (1988) in Hawaii, concluded that campus crime was a multi-dimensional phenomenon, that no single theory apparently embraced school crime and that despite efforts by school authorities effective programs to counter problems remained few and far between. Hawaii was chosen for this particular

study for a number of reasons. First, because it is the largest remaining school district in the US that has yet to achieve a reasonable racial balance, it remains a segregated system. Second, Hawaii is a microcosm of the diversity found elsewhere in the US in that there are urban, suburban and rural schools in the same school district. Third, the level of school crime in Hawaii, in the Safe School Study of 1978, was the highest in the US.

Few, if any, comparable studies exist in the Australian context. The National Committee on Violence (1990) approached educational authorities in each State and Territory requesting information on the incidence of behavioural problems within their school systems. It received detailed submissions only from the ACT and the Northern Territory. This lack of response is not altogether surprising. School authorities are reluctant to release figures which may reflect negatively upon them. Yet, not to acknowledge the issue is to deny the opportunity to seek meaningful solutions. The information source therefore becomes informal with figures and reports left to be gleaned from the media. For example, in Queensland it was reported by the Courier Mail (Feb 1993) that:

"At least .... 28 Queensland schools were attacked by thieves and vandals during the last week of the school holidays. Police expect the total number of attacks on schools during the holidays to exceed 200 and the damages bill to top $1m."

Figures released by the Victorian Injury Surveillance System (1993) indicate that of 546 children who went to three Melbourne hospitals in the three years to 1991, 222 (40%) had been injured in quarrels, 135 (24.5%) had harmed themselves (mostly by chemical ingestion), 109 (20%) had been abused and 74 (14%) assaulted. Nearly a third of those assaulted were attacked in school grounds. 85% of those injured in school were boys. Head and facial injuries, usually caused by a punch to the face, were the most common form of injury (45%), followed by hand injuries (39%) that included wrist fractures. It is likely that these figures represent only the tip of the iceberg, with many injuries sustained in schools being treated at home, by local doctors or going unreported. It is also important to point out that a considerable percentage of the injuries are the result of accidents and may well be the consequence of 'play'. These points notwithstanding, the figures indicate that violence in the school setting can and does occur. It is possible to include acts of vandalism, bullying and assault and it is not difficult to establish a case that schools have long been prime sites for violence and injury. Students and staff are potential victims of violence in the school setting either directly or indirectly. In the case of students, a pattern of violence, established initially in the home setting, is reinforced in the school setting either by staff, by other students or both. Petrie et al (1979) explored the consequences for a single student defined as being in trouble or at risk of the lack of communication, cooperation and coordination of assistance during that student's school career. Not long after the article was published the student, who had already been expelled from two schools, was reported as having been hospitalised after being beaten up by his employer. Over the years further information concerning incidents of violence came to hand culminating in the news of the death of the individual, aged twenty-seven, in a street brawl in 1991. The cycle of violence, long established, reached an almost inevitable conclusion. Since the original investigation of the school-delinquency

relationship, it has been ascertained that seven students involved in the original study have met violent deaths other than by accident or suicide.

There are other issues which make schools appropriate sites for the study of violence. For example, Lawrence, et al (1984) talk of the violence of language. In a particularly a 'difficult' school, Lawrence, et al (1984:163) recount the ways in which students utilised language to insult the teachers:

"... the crude and reductive use of language characterised the way in which many of the students use English... this brutally simplistic, blunt and wildly imprecise language is closely related to the physical grossness of many of their responses."

Language often lies at the heart of student violence towards other students, with insults, taunts and 'put-downs', central to these interactions. It is possible also to argue that teachers have long utilised language in their armoury of weapons against students. Language is critical in issues of sexism and racism.

It is important to note that staff and students may experience high levels of alienation. In the case of students this may be a result of boredom with, irrelevance of or violence perpetrated by the curriculum. As Slee and Knight (1992:7) state:

"All of the pep talks and enhancement programs grafted on top of the school curriculum do little to shift the residual resistance and alienation that may be nurtured by assessment practices or discipline sanctions that are non-redemptive. If failure and alienation are encouraged by a curriculum that denies the importance of certain groups along class, ethnicity or gender lines, or by teaching that obscures the objectives for some students because of limited pedagogy, then the welfare of students is permanently jeopardised."

Students are also open to the influences of television, cinema, videos and video games, any or all of which may affect social behaviours.

Teachers, of course, are key players in the school context. They may be involved in violence or suffers from the effects of violence in a variety or ways. Until relatively recent legislation concerning the abolition of corporal punishment, teachers have held the lead in the use of forms of violence in school settings. They may be victims and/or perpetrators (Petrie, 1983; Challinger, 1987). They may suffer high levels of stress or alienation not only from situations defined as 'difficult'. Teaching is an exacting, demanding task, but teachers are often ill-prepared for the exigencies of teaching. They do not always receive due recognition from society or other professionals. More important, teachers are open to the vagaries of systems that may transfer them into situations to which they do not particularly want to go or which may starve them of resources.

Schools are only one potential site for violence experienced by children. It is at this point, however, that it is worth extending the consideration to explore the implications of violence in such settings.

Critically, in the context of this paper, there is a wealth of literature available to indicate that aggressive behaviour in the early grades of schooling is a precursor of delinquency in adolescence (West & Farrington, 1973; Magrusson, et al 1975; West & Farrington, 1978; Olweus, 1979; Chaiken & Chaiken, 1982; Patterson, 1982; Rutter, 1982; Emsinger, et al, 1983; Kohlberg, et al, 1984; Blumstein, et al, 1985; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeher, 1987; Hawkins, et al, 1991, etc). For some children, antisocial behaviour stabilises in the early grades and maintains a high degree of stability over time. The more serious and the greater the frequency of early antisocial behaviours, the greater the risk that antisocial and criminal behaviour will continue into later adolescence and adulthood (Robins, 1978; Farrington, 1979; 1985; 1986; etc).

Early antisocial behaviour also predicts the frequent use of drugs in adolscence (Robins, 1978; Kellam & Brown, 1982; Lerner & Vicary, 1984; Simcha-Fagan, et al, 1986). In similar vein, the lessons from research into child abuse indicate the high degree of correlation between abuse and later delinquency or self-abuse (Garbarino, 1983).

What clearly emerges from this literature is that prevention programs that reduce antisocial behaviour, particularly aggressive behaviour in boys, during the early grades of school hold promise for preventing delinquency and drug use in adolescence. In other words, cognitive, social and imitative competencies that underpin violence are learned very early. Psychology, Criminology and Sociology can all be drawn upon to show haw the development of violent and aggressive behaviour exist within a broad social context of risk and protective factors. (eg Gottrredson & Hirshi, 1990; Hawkins, von Cleve & Catalano, 1991). These cognitive, social and imitative competencies, these risk and protective factors can best be moulded by the earliest possible exposure to adequate opportunities to learn the different competencies which prevent violence.

Current wisdom in criminological theory indicates that an embracing, ecological approach to the explanation of crime offers the best opportunity so far for understanding criminal causality, criminal behaviour and for creating meaningful, effective prevention programs. Drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development model (1979), the ecological systems approach (Martens, 1993) argues for the inclusion of all levels of the individual's environment, from the immediate setting via settings which indirectly influence the individual to the more abstract general level of the macro system, or the overall ideological, historical and political values of the cultural setting in which the individual lives.

Social Ecology of Violence

Figure 1 shows a schematic representation of various ecological structures. The ecological structure surrounding, in this case a child, are defined by three concentric circles. The innermost circle indicates the contexts in which the child is involved at any

one time. These contexts represent the child's entire set of microsystems - parents, siblings, friends, the home, teachers and so on - which together make up the mesosystem. The middle circle is the ecosystem which includes all those circumstances which have an indirect influence on the development of the child, such as professional working status of the parents, local residential conditions and so on. The outer circle represents the macrosystem which embraces public political attitudes or policies to socio-political issues, to family issues, legislation on family matters, on children, and so on.
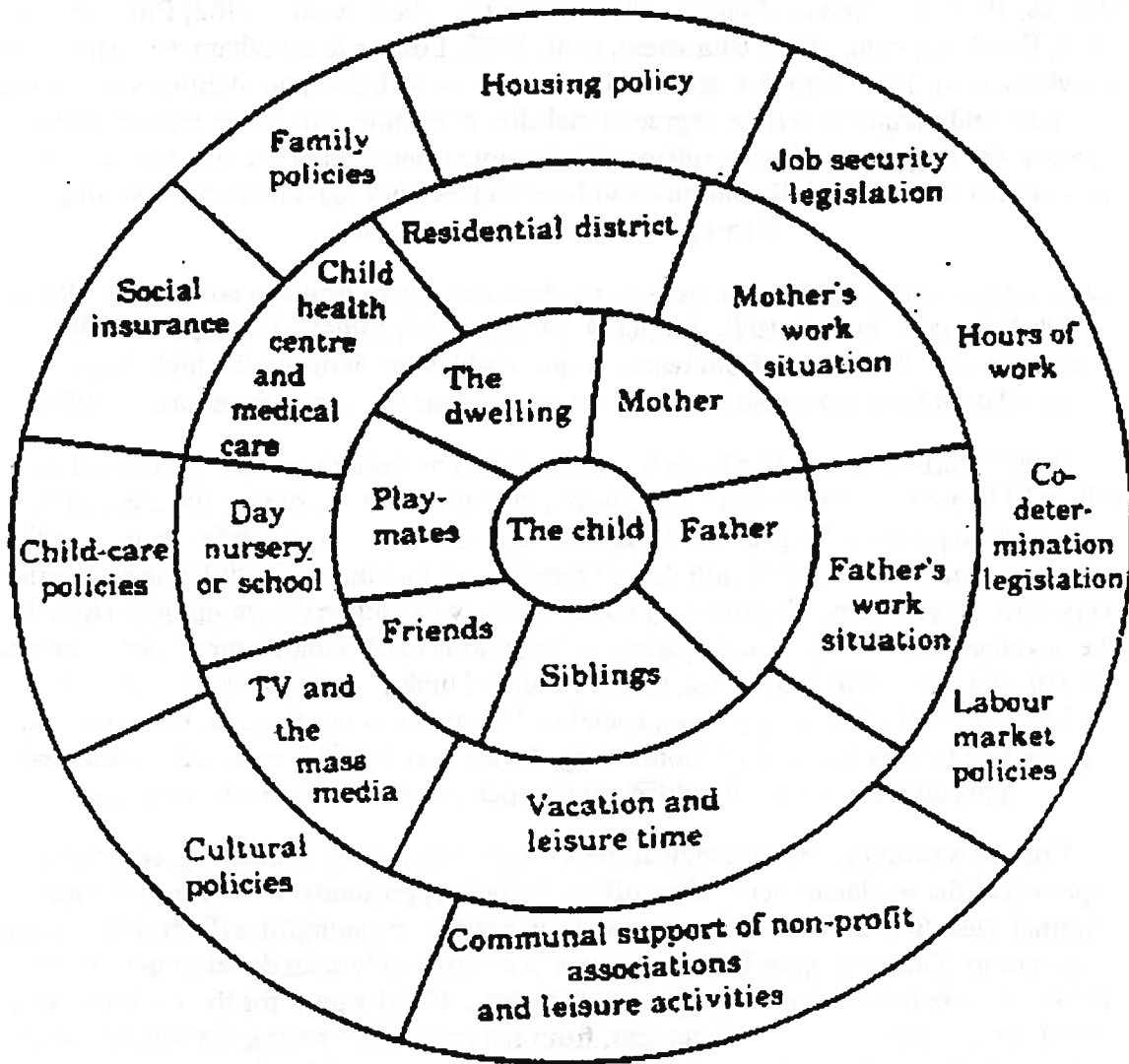
Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model

The potential usefulness of this approach lies in its inclusivity, that is, the need for consideration of not only many variables which impinge upon the individual but also of the various levels of interaction and involvement by the individual in social interaction. It represents a community-based approach to issues, involving all aspects of a particular community, but tailored to the particular community context within which it is based.

Thus, from the perspective of crime prevention, the individual may represent the starting point, but wider issues such as the individual's immediate family, school and community become important variables in the establishment or development of any crime prevention program. It will also be necessary to link with official agencies, such as the police, community services and health authorities. At the same time, the program in any given community must be congruent with and tailored to current legal structure or, in the event of movement towards change, it will be important to take account of prevailing social attitudes and perceptions.

Violence Prevention Programs

It is possible to point to a number of community-based crime prevention programs that have been established and that have some demonstrable evidence of success. Four examples will suffice in this context.

First, the *Perry Preschool Project*. This program was established in 1962 in Michigan, USA. The aim of the program was to provide early intervention for children from disadvantaged backgrounds through intellectual stimulation to increase cognitive abilities and improve later school achievement with the explicit objective of reducing the risk of future delinquency. The program highlighted the relationship between poor school performance, low self-esteem and antisocial behaviour.

Children who attended the program, performed better in school and later in adult education. They were more likely to complete schooling and obtain employment. They were less likely to have received any form of welfare assistance. Teenage pregnancies were about half the number in the control group (new program) and at age 19 arrest rates were 40% lower.

The program indicates that early childhood intervention in the form of preschool enrichment programs for disadvantaged children has the potential to produce significant educational, economic and crime prevention benefits (Schweinhart, et al, 1993).

Second, the *Elmira Prenatal/Early Infancy Project*. This program was established in the USA in 1970. The aim of the program was to identify and help change factors in the family environment which affect maternal health, infant care-giving, employment, education and family planning. The program targeted the high rates of child abuse and neglect among families at risk owing to factors such as poverty and lack of personal and social resources.

The program was based on the premise that many of the most pervasive, intractable and costly health problems faced by high-risk women and children are a consequence of poor maternal health, dysfunctional infant care-giving and stressful environmental conditions which interfere with individual and family functioning. The program was designed to begin during pregnancy and continue until the child was two years of age. The focus of the program was a series of home visits, conducted by nurse home visitors, providing

parent education, enhancing social support by family and friends and linking the family with other health and human services.

Home visited mothers showed an 82% increase in the number of months they were employed, a reduction of 43% in subsequent pregnancies during the four years after the delivery of the first child, an improvement in diet, less restriction and punishment of their children, less child emergency medical care during the first two years of life and less incidence of physical abuse or neglect.

The program indicates that community-based early intervention programs with "at-risk" families leads to improved health, better employment opportunities and more positive parent-child interaction. This subsequently reduces the incidence of child abuse and neglect which, in view of the high correlation between abuse and future self-abuse or delinquency, has the potential to reduce future juvenile offending (Olds, et al, 1988).

The third program is the *Family Intervention Program* introduced in Oregon, USA, in 1980. The aim of the program was to train parents to train their own problem children so that antisocial behaviour did not continue into adulthood. Parents were trained to use positive, non-coercive methods of discipline in the belief that aggressive behaviour in children may be fostered by failure of parents to communicate to their children ways in which they are expected to behave, failure to monitor behaviour and failure to enforce rules promptly and unambiguously, utilising appropriate rewards and penalties.

The Oregon Social Learning Program is one of the most meticulously evaluated parent training initiatives for parents of aggressive and delinquent children, indicated that the program was effective in reducing theft and other antisocial behaviour by children. However, the results were only short-lived and indicate that fuller, more embracing programs involving the child, care-givers, schools and the wider community are more appropriate (Patterson, et al, 1992; Snuder & Patterson, 1987).

Finally, the *Prevention of School Bullying Program* introduced in Norway, in 1982. This was a national school-based information and awareness program designed to reduce bullying and to restore productive educational environments. The program operated at three levels - the individual, the class and the school. At the individual level, counselling was provided for bullies, victims and their parents. Schools held conference days and established policies and protocols for swift intervention in bullying situations. At the class level, rules were devised to reduce or prevent bullying. Pro-social behaviour was encouraged and rewarded. Undesirable behaviour was highlighted and non-hostile, non-physical sanctions consistently applied to offenders. Regular meetings occurred with parents and children.

Before and after measures of bullying and victimisation indicated that the program reduced the prevalence of victimisation by about 50% and significantly reduced the number of offenders (Farrington, 1991; Olweus, 1993).

Changing Emphases

The key to success would appear to be in creating programs that have community support, that are community-based and that are 'owned' by the communities in which they operate. Single institution or organisationally-based progress may have limited success, generally short-term, within the specific context but will wither without broader support. Thus, schools are useful vehicles for the introduction or development of programs but should be viewed only as one context within a number of others that may require change. The longer-term answer would appear to lie with changes to the overall culture -changing from a violent culture to a non-violent, non-aggressive culture. Developments in peace education provide some pointers for the future.

A cursory examination of the literature on peace studies suggests that ongoing interest in and striving for peace has occurred throughout human history. In particular, post Second World War, peace studies emerged with the emphasis on direct (personal) violence. This included consideration of violence directed by one person onto another, for example, in assault, torture, terrorism or war. The emphasis was upon exploring violence or conflict rather than peace; peace was defined negatively as the absence of war or violence or conflict.

Through the 1960's and 1970's, the focus began to shift from direct to indirect (structural) violence, with increasing consideration being given to the effects of social, political and economic systems on people's lives. For example, racism, sexism and the denial of human rights increasingly became recognised as forms of violence which reduced human potential or well-being. Thus, issues of freedom and social justice were increasingly emphasised by peace researchers. The notion that positive peace or the absence of structural violence began to emerge more fully. Hicks (1988) summarises this evolution of definitions of peace in the following figure (Figure 2):
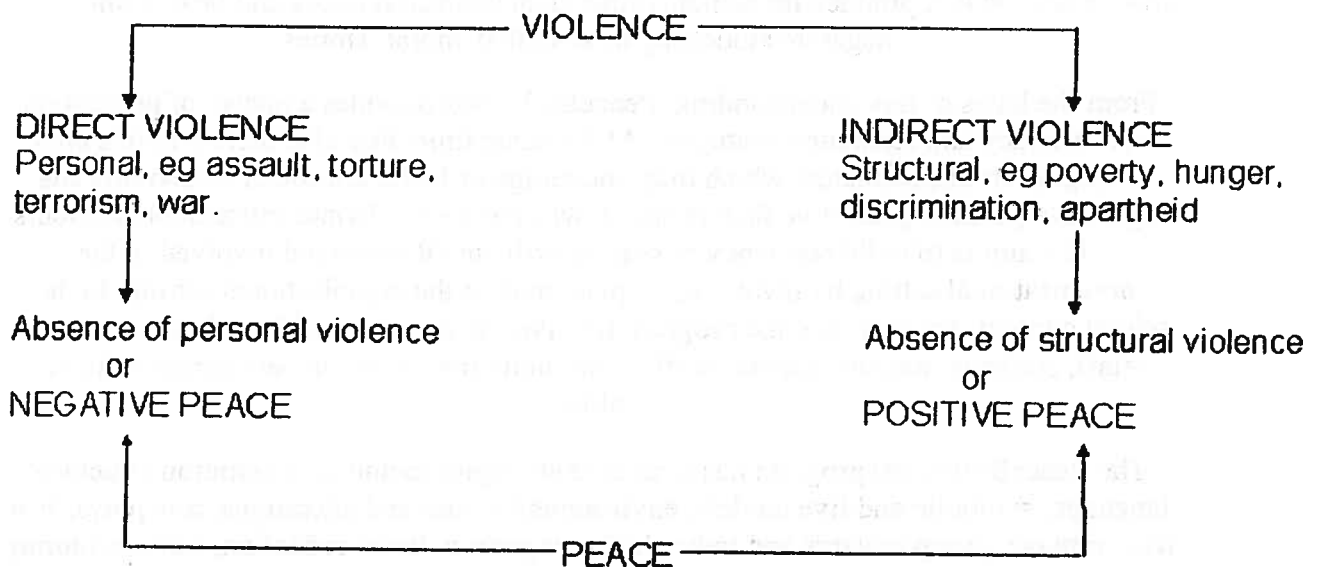
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                        ┌──────────── VIOLENCE ────────────┐
                        │                                   │
                        ▼                                   ▼
DIRECT VIOLENCE                             INDIRECT VIOLENCE
Personal, eg assault, torture,              Structural, eg poverty, hunger,
terrorism, war.                             discrimination, apartheid
        │                                            │
        ▼                                            ▼
Absence of personal violence                Absence of structural violence
          or                                          or
NEGATIVE PEACE                              POSITIVE PEACE
        ▲                                            ▲
        │                                            │
        └──────────────── PEACE ─────────────────────┘
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Figure 2: Defining Peace (Hicks, 1988)

This approach to defining peace draws also upon Galtung's (1976) conceptualisation of the 'problems of peace' - violence and war, inequality, injustice, environmental damage, alienation - as opposed to the values underlying peace - non-violence, economic welfare, social justice, ecological balance, participation. The important point here is that in order to study issues of peace and conflict, it is necessary to encompass a broad spectrum of interests. Moreover, it is essential to acknowledge and remain aware that violence is to be found at the macro through to the micro levels of social analysis, simultaneously.

PeaceBuilders®

One such program, in place in the US, is PeaceBuilders? (Embry, et al, 1995). PeaceBuilders® is a systematic project to increase primary school children's cognitive, social and imitative competencies in a school-wide climate interaction - using scientifically derived procedures.

PeaceBuilders® begins by recognising the cognitive, social and imitative markers of children developmentally at risk for violent behaviour in adolescence. For example, in cognitive terms, children who are suspicious or hostile, have difficulty reading the non-verbal intentions of others, have difficulty reading the emotional impact of their behaviour, have poor ability to narrate their own behaviour in the past, present and future, are impulsive and have difficulty with the spoken and written word are at greater risk than their peers who do not manifest these markers. These children are more likely to insult peers, siblings and adults which then triggers acts of aggression, are more likely to be disruptive of activities, to commit physical aggression and engage in acts of vandalism and retribution. These are the social markers of children at risk. In imitative terms, these children are less likely and able to imitate socially competent models, are more likely to imitate actions that produce immediate rather than delayed rewards and be disinhibited by negative modelling in so-called 'moral' stories.

From the basis of this understanding, PeaceBuilders® provides a matrix of prevention, self-efficacy and resiliency strategies. At the same time, PeaceBuilders® builds upon recognition of risk factors which may encourage or foster antisocial behaviours and highlights positive protective factors which will reduce or obviate antisocial behaviours. The aim is to build resiliency or coping skills in all personnel involved in the organisational setting by involving all personnel in the organisational setting. In the school context, for example, the program involves all members of the school community - staff, students, parents, support staff, community members - in developing resiliency skills.

The PeaceBuilders® program has nine core strategies including a common structured language, symbolic and live models, environmental cues and alterations, role plays, 'new way' replays, group rewards and individual recognition, threat reduction, self-monitoring,

peer-monitoring and generalisation. Essentially, however, the program is build upon five simple core messages:

1. Give Up Put-downs

2. Praise People

3. Seek Wise People

4. Notice Hurts

5. Right Wrongs

During 1996, the PeaceBuilders® program was trialled in two Greater Brisbane schools. Although a full evaluation is yet to hand, staff and students have reported fewer acts of aggression, less bullying, less classroom disruption, greater focus on learning and increased desire to be at school. The program, which is introduced over three successive years, will be extended to the families and the communities in which the schools are located in the coming months.

Figures 3 and 4 indicate the ways in which PeaceBuilders® can assist in strengthening communities by increasing educational and employment prospects for young people (Figure 3) whilst, at the same time, reducing levels of violence, the proclivity towards self-abuse, including substance abuse and increasing levels of self-worth (Figure 4).

The key to long-term crime prevention lies with programs such as PeaceBuilders®.. Ownership by the communities involved will increase the levels of commitment both short and longer term to the success of the program. Individual ownership will also increase the degree of uniqueness of each program but will allow for communities to develop strategies that work for that particular community. This is the development of what Martens (1993) describes as the "socio-ecological" perspective on crime prevention, in which it is presumed that different communities offer preconditions for different living patterns among community members. Different communities can develop specific socialisation patterns as regards not only the family but the peer group and school as well which will serve to reduce rates of offending. A community-based approach, with common messages extending across all areas of the community, the involvement of support service and agencies in a concerted, coordinated approach to issues and the development in children in particular of peaceful attitudes from an early age hold greater promise for reductions in levels of violence.
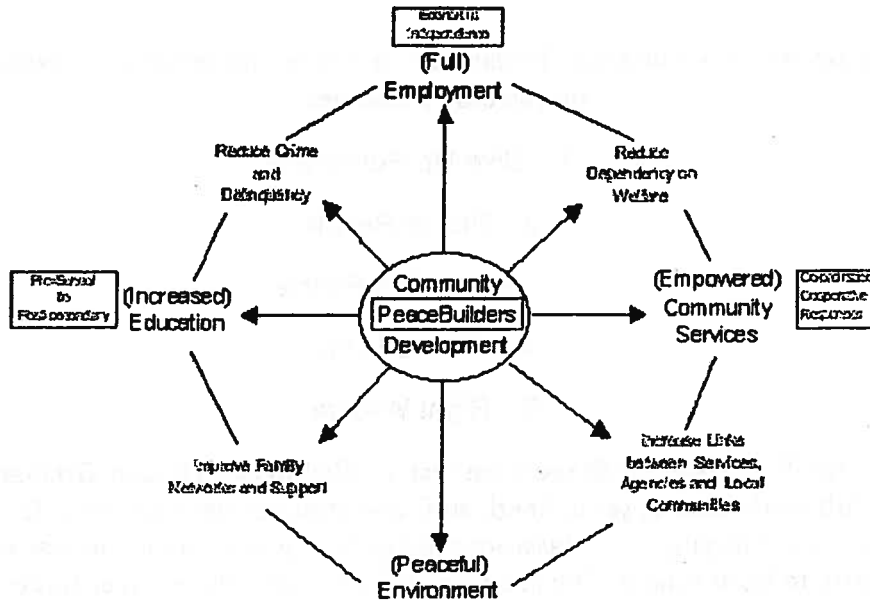
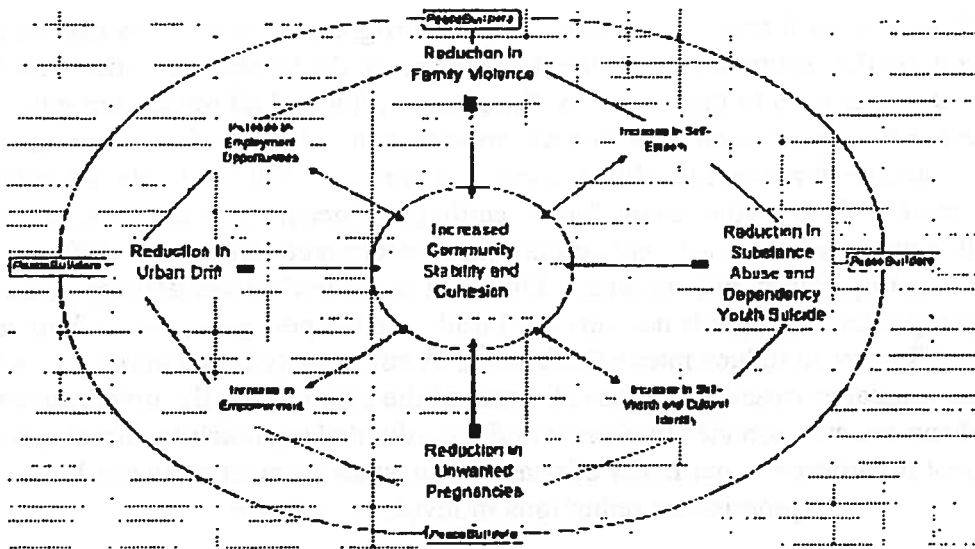**Figure 3: PeaceBuilders and Community Development**

Figure 4: PeaceBuilders and Community Development

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