

Research Report

# The Girls' Project



***Girl Fighting:***

***An investigation of young women's  
violent and anti-social behaviour***

**Dr Donna Swift**





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However, it is the girls who agreed to share their personal stories that deserve our deepest gratitude. Without them, we would be so less informed.

Dr Donna Swift, Principal Researcher, The Girls' Project

Dee Cresswell, Manager, Stopping Violence Services Nelson

## THE AUTHOR

Dr Donna Swift holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from the University of Otago, New Zealand and a BSc Honours in Cultural Anthropology from Trent University, Canada. Her doctorate dissertation 'From Rags to Rituals' explored the untold stories of women's oppression. Dr Swift is the Social Science Research Coordinator and a senior lecturer at Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology, New Zealand, where she specialises in social research methodology and current societal issues. Over the last seven years she has focused on young women's use of violent and anti-social behaviour. In 2005, she developed and piloted the *Turning Point Violence Intervention Programme for Girls*. Realising New Zealand's need for in-depth research on this topic and working alongside Stopping Violence Services Nelson, she was contracted as the principal researcher for *The Girls' Project*, a recently completed two-year investigation of young women's use of violence in the Tasman Police District. Recognised as a leading expert in this field, Dr Swift has been invited to give international and national presentations and training workshops. Soroptimist International has named *Cliques, crews and catfights: Moving beyond girl violence*, the work of Dr Swift, as their New Zealand project for the next two years.

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report is based on the findings from The Girl's Project, a two-year investigation of girls' use of violence and anti-social behaviour, which was conducted in the Tasman Police District between August 2009 and August 2011. The research was funded by the Lottery Community Sector Research Committee. Ethical approval was obtained from the Association of Social Science Researchers and the Association of Social Anthropologists of Aotearoa/New Zealand in 2009.

The goal of the research was to establish a substantial base of understanding about young women's use of violent and anti-social behaviour specific to the New Zealand context. From this knowledge Stopping Violence Services Nelson (SVSN) would be able to create guidelines for best practice for agencies and professionals to use when working in young women's violence intervention and have the capacity to evaluate and advise about existing services for girls.

Data collection employed both qualitative and quantitative methods. Over 3400 questionnaires were collected from Year 9 and 10 boys and girls to gauge the involvement of young people and provide gender comparison. In addition, 40 focus groups of girls, between the ages of 12 to 18, have provided the perspectives of young women from mainstream settings. However, the most significant contribution to this report comes from the more than 100 interviews conducted with teenage girls, many of whom came to the researchers' attention or were referred by authorities because of their engagement in violent behaviour.

### **Key points**

#### **From the questionnaires**

- 97.6% of Year 9 and 10 boys and girls report involvement in a climate of peer related violence, suggesting a normalising of this behaviour amongst adolescents.
- Almost as many boys as girls engage in relational aggression, challenging the stereotype that this is female behaviour.
- Violence and anti-social behaviour for both genders is not just an urban problem, as findings indicate it occurs slightly more in provincial locations.

#### **From the interviews and focus groups**

- Girls' violence and anti-social behaviour exists along a continuum of intensity beginning with relational aggression and progressing to serious physical altercation. The further along the continuum the girl operated the more her behaviour extended beyond her female peers to include male peers, parents, extended family, teachers and police.
- Violence within a household was commonplace with sibling violence between sisters intensifying to cause physical injury, and sometimes serving to hone street fighting skills.

- Girls with little respect for their mothers responded to them with the same violence as they did their female peers. Girls were more hesitant to physically fight fathers, acknowledging differences in strength.
- Many girl fights are instigated through competition for peer popularity and male attention.
- Girl fighting is frequently viewed as entertainment, particularly by boys who rarely intervene and sometimes actively encourage it.
- Not only do some girls fight to keep themselves safe and secure, but they earnestly defend those they value.
- Some girls rationalised and ritualised violence as a 'normal' and a 'natural' part of their world. Therefore, violence for the purpose of defence is viewed as a morally acceptable action.
- Violence for some girls fosters their reputation and is key to their social identity; hence it was perceived to be better to take a hiding than to back down.
- It is common for a girl with a reputation to be asked to fight on behalf of another girl. The arrangement has mutual benefits, yet to an outsider it can obscure where responsibility should be assigned.
- Girls also turned to violence to impose their own standard of retribution for perceived injustices that affronted them, not trusting in conventional systems of justice.
- Issues of concern associated with girls' use of violence and anti-social behaviour include gender specific issues enmeshed with youth risk factors.
- Prevention and intervention needs to be gender specific, gender responsive and trauma informed and needs to coincide with identified windows of opportunity to be most effective.

## WHY WE DID THIS RESEARCH

### INTRODUCTION

In late 2004, the joint initiative of Stopping Violence Services Nelson, Presbyterian Support Nelson, Whenua Iti Trust Inc and Get Safe Motueka received funding from Child, Youth and Family to research, develop and trial a pilot programme to address an area of need concerning youth violence in the Nelson/Motueka area. Dr Donna Swift was contracted as project manager in 2005. Primary research involving community agencies, school staff, representatives of government services and youth workers identified young women and girls as the target group that community services needed help with. These young women were often referred to as the 'too hard group' and it was identified that this was a very difficult group to work with because of their anger issues.

Turning Point, a violence intervention programme for girls and young women was piloted for 20 weeks in 2005. It was based on overseas' best practice and while the pilot was considered successful, the Turning Point Governance Group, consisting of Stopping Violence Services Nelson, Whenua Iti Trust Inc and the Tasman District Police, with Dr Swift as the strategy advisor, recognised the need for New Zealand specific research to fine tune the programme and to enable the Governance Group to secure sufficient funds to establish an on-going programme. As a result of this, members of the Governance Group sought research funding to help gain a fuller appreciation of the violence and anti-social behaviour used by New Zealand girls and young women, thus to assist with gaining support from funders and further the best practice knowledge base about this issue.

Following on from this, concern about young women's use of violent and anti-social was also being voiced by New Zealand's Youth Court Judge Andrew Becroft (NZ Herald, 27.2.06), Children's Commissioner, Cindy Kiro (Press, 24.5.08) and President of the Secondary Principals' Association, Peter Gall (NZ Herald, 24.05.08). It was becoming clear that although young women's use of violence and anti-social behaviour was being acknowledged at these paramount levels, there was a void of New Zealand based research. Individuals working with these young women were struggling for answers, and required comprehensive information to help them address young women's violent and anti-social behaviour. The then Senior Sergeant Ross Lienert, Youth Aid and Family Violence Coordinator of the Tasman District Police stated that his staff could not apply the same methods used with males because they found young women more difficult to work with (Nelson Mail, 28.05.07).

The need for knowledge about young women's use of violent and anti-social behaviour was also matched by an overriding concern that this behaviour led to the perpetuation of the cycle of violence and made young women vulnerable to other risk taking behaviours affecting their health and possibly leading to further offending as adults.

After continually being approached by parents and agencies seeking help in addressing young women's violent behaviour Stopping Violence Services Nelson made an application in October 2008 to the Lottery Community Sector Research Committee. The intent was to conduct quality research on which to develop programmes for this target group and enhance the quality of services available within other communities facing

similar concerns. Once ethical approval was obtained from the Association of Social Science Researchers as well as from the Association of Social Anthropologist of Aotearoa/New Zealand, *The Girls' Project* was launched in August 2009.

## AIMS AND SIGNIFICANCE

The aims of this research project were to:

- Investigate the nature of the violent and anti-social behaviour used by young women (ie. *What behaviour do young women use that is violent and anti-social?*)
- Establish the manner and frequency in which this behaviour is carried out (ie. *How and when are they using this behaviour?*)
- Assess possible factors that contributed to young women's use of violence and anti-social behaviour (ie. *Why do they choose to use it?*)
- Analyse the meaning and function of this violence in young women's lives that support the use of this behaviour (ie. *What do they achieve from using it?*)
- Understand the impact of this behaviour amongst young women (ie. *What do their peers think about this behaviour?*)
- Identify factors that would contribute to the positive development of effective prevention and intervention (ie. *What information needs to be considered and implemented to obtain the best practice?*)

This research establishes a substantial base of understanding about young women's use of violent and anti-social behaviour specific to the New Zealand context. From this knowledge Stopping Violence Services Nelson will be able to create guidelines for best practice for agencies and professionals to use when working in young women's violence intervention and have the capacity to evaluate and advise about existing services for girls. Outputs will include industry specific staff training, reports, academic publications, national and international conference presentations and gender specific intervention programmes. Stopping Violence Services Nelson will host the formal launch of the research findings on 5 August 2011 in Nelson. A hardcopy of this report will be available at that time, as well as a PDF version which will be available by contacting Stopping Violence Services Nelson. This report will also be available through libraries.

## HOW WE DID THIS RESEARCH

### METHODOLOGY

This project emerged to meet the needs of Stopping Violence Services Nelson and other community agencies for New Zealand-based research to assist with the development of best practice for services for young women who use violent and anti-social behaviour.

*The Girls' Project* employed mixed methodology. It utilised phenomenology to investigate the relationship between young women and their use of violence and anti-social behaviour. Phenomenology is the study of phenomena as they present themselves in direct experience. It is the description of lived experience, rather than the individual themselves that is the focus of phenomenology. This research also applied an ethnographic approach allowing in-depth exploration. The strengths of ethnography, a research methodology rooted in social anthropology, lies in its ability to gather thorough or thick description that can lead to profound insight and recognition of multi-tiered perspectives. By definition, ethnography is the study of life from the point of view of its participants, with the goal to discover, describe, understand and interpret their world (O'Leary, 2004). As a social anthropologist, Dr Swift, the Principal Researcher, is well versed in these methodologies.

Data collection methods utilised in this research project included both qualitative methods (focus groups and individual interviews) and quantitative methods (questionnaires). Qualitative methods provide a rich understanding of girls' use of violent and anti-social behaviour, while quantitative methods determine representative findings allowing generalisations to be established. Each data collection method utilised is described along with a brief overview of sampling and means of access to the sample group. These data collection methods were replicated at the various locations throughout Nelson, Marlborough, Tasman and West Coast Districts. This replication and use of multiple data collection methods allowed findings to be triangulated and enhanced the validity of the research results. The size of the various samples included, as much as possible, the diverse demographic situations found within the research areas, and included participants from across the age range, from both urban and provincial settings, as well as various school settings, ethnicities and backgrounds.

## **GOOD PRACTICE AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Ethical approval was obtained from the Association of Social Science Researchers and the Association of Social Anthropologists of Aotearoa/New Zealand in 2009.

This research was aligned with the code of ethics of the Association of Social Science Researchers, Association of Social Anthropologists of Aotearoa/New Zealand and the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers. All participants, including the parents and guardians of those under 16, were fully informed of the purpose and process of the research and were asked for their consent. All participants were treated with respect and all efforts made to ensure they were not harmed in any way as a result of this research. Throughout the duration of the research and in particular the writing and presentation of this research report, great care has been taken to protect the identity of the participants. The names and any other identifiable details of all participants have been removed or changed. Any similarities with known individuals, locations or events are purely coincidental.

### **Informed consent for participation in the focus groups and individual interviews**

In the first instance, gaining informed consent from the participant meant that information about the research was given in a written and verbal manner that was appropriate to their ability to comprehend. It described the purpose, nature and procedure of the research, the risks and benefits of participating and stated the participants' right to withdraw from the research at any stage and that the information would be destroyed upon their withdrawal. It informed the participant of how their information would be used, how it would be stored, for what duration, how it would be disposed of at the end of the project, and how they can have access to the final report. It also assured participants that all identifiers would be removed from any reporting. It also provided background and contact details of the Principal Researcher and the organisation and funders behind the project.

The informed consent form also stated that if the researcher is concerned that a participant is of serious risk to themselves or others, she would discuss her concern with the participant and inform them that she will refer them to appropriate services. Participants were asked to sign the consent form, and consent was sought from the parents and guardians of those under 16-years of age. This process was used for the interviews and focus group participants.

In addition, participants of the individual interviews were offered both at the beginning and end of their interview, the opportunity to review, at a later date, the transcript of their interview and withdraw, alter, modify or add to its content. Those not wishing to review their interview were asked to indicate so on their consent form. Those choosing to review their transcript were asked to sign a transcript release form after reviewing the transcript.

### **Informed consent for participation in the questionnaires**

The health teacher was asked to inform students three weeks prior to the date nominated for the questionnaire distribution. Parents and guardians were informed through the school newsletter of the research request for Year 9 and 10 students to complete an anonymous questionnaire. Parents and guardians and the student were also provided with a description of the *Girls' Project*, its purpose, the researcher and

how they could access the final results. The newsletter contained the contact details of the Principal Researcher and was sent out at least three weeks in advance of the questionnaire distribution date allowing parents and guardians the opportunity to contact the Principal Researcher with any questions.

Parents and guardians were informed that participation in completing the questionnaire was voluntary and students choosing not to be involved or whose parents or guardians do not want their involvement, will not be required to participate. The questionnaire was given out as part of a health education session and students were invited to complete the questionnaire and deposit it in the collection box or envelope at the end of class. Students not wanting to participate were asked to deposit their blank questionnaire in the collection box or envelope so to protect their anonymity, as they would not be distinguishable from the other students.

Completion and return of the questionnaire was taken as the participant's consent.

#### **Informed consent for participation in the website questionnaires**

Participants wanting to complete the website questionnaire were provided with a description of the *Girls' Project*, its purpose, the researcher and how they could access the final results on the website. Completion of the questionnaire was taken as the participant's consent.

#### **Security of participants' identity**

With regard to good practice, all identifiers were removed from research data collected from focus groups and individual interviews. Any records kept of participants were assigned an identification code known only to the Principal Researcher. All questionnaires were anonymous.

All recordings and written notes were stored in a secure, locked facility at Stopping Violence Services Nelson. They will remain in storage until the end of the project (approximately 5 years) and then destroyed through shredding and destruction.

Those involved in the project who had contact with the participants or the participants' information, were asked to sign a confidentiality agreement.

#### **Care and well-being of the researchers**

The Principal Researcher was provided with a website and email address, post office box number and mobile phone number that were solely designated to the Girls' Project. Her personal contact details were not publically available. The Principal Researcher also participated in regular supervision sessions with Celia Lashlie. These sessions ensured she retained clarity about her role and responsibilities; ensuring that she had a safe place in which to review her practice; this assisted her to develop strategies to manage work related stresses.

To minimise the potential risk of false accusations by participants, the Principal Researcher limited contact with participants to designated times and locations.

Research assistants were hired from within their community. It is acknowledged that this decision had the potential to compromise or complicate relationships or roles they



held within the community, as well as with the participants. These issues were discussed with research assistants prior to hiring so that they could seek guidance from appropriate sources, for example, their iwi, whanau or employers. Wherever possible research assistants had experience within the social service sector and experience and awareness of professional practice and codes of conduct and ethics. Tangata Whenua were the preferred choice as research assistant for groups involving Tangata Whenua girls. If the research assistants required supervision and it was not provided in their current role, the research project offered assistance. All researchers were required to provide a current Police Clearance.

This research project gives particular concern to three areas of ethical practice: research with young people, research about sensitive issues, and research involving Tangata Whenua participants.

#### **Ethical Issue: Research with young people**

This is in addition to the discussion above about informed consent with young people.

Children and young people are considered more vulnerable members of society by virtue of their limited age and life experience, yet it is important that research allows them to have a voice (Powell & Smith, 2006). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12 affirms children's right to express their opinions and have these taken into account in any matters that affect them. This was ratified by New Zealand in 1993 (Powell & Smith, 2006). In respect of this, this research, following the guidelines set out by Powell and Smith (2006) provided information about the project and the rights as a participants in a manner that is easily understood or 'youth friendly'; considered the consent of the young person to self-select to participate in the research as foremost; and used research personnel with sufficient knowledge and understanding to reflectively consider the participants' responses.

Putting the well-being of the participants foremost, each participant was informed prior to their session that if the Principal Researcher is concerned about their safety or well-being she will inform those who can help them. However before doing so she would privately discuss her concern with the participant.

To further reduce the possibility of harm or risk occurring to a young person, each participant was provided with an information handout listing a wide range of social services available to aid young people.

#### **Ethical issue: Research about sensitive issues**

Concern exists as to the possibility of participant distress occurring as a result of researching a topic that some may find sensitive. Yet it is the experience of Corbin and Morse (2003) that participants react positively, "and in fact, many are grateful for the interview experience" (p.336). With respect to this concern the research was designed to give participants control over their involvement.

Young women were able to freely decide whether to participate in the interviews. They were informed of the consent and confidentiality issues. By using unstructured interactive interviews participants retained considerable control over the interviewing process by choosing what to talk about, how much information to share and how much

detail to give. While the interview can revive distressing memories, it can also be therapeutic offering an opportunity to vent anger and emotions, and to reflect. Hutchinson et al (cited in Corbin and Morse, 2003) listed seven possible benefits of qualitative interviews. They (a) serve as a catharsis, (b) provide self-acknowledgement and validation, (c) contribute to a sense of purpose, (d) increase self-awareness, (e) grant a sense of empowerment, (f) promote healings, and (g) give voice to the voiceless and disenfranchised. Corbin and Morse (2003) stress the importance of a skilled researcher, who through sensitivity, intuitiveness and authenticity can care for the participant and themselves.

The Principal Researcher has an extensive background researching, supporting and facilitating females through sensitive discussions. She asked interview participants if she or if they prefer, the research assistant, could follow up with them a few days afterwards to determine if any distressing effects still linger. In addition, recognising that some girls may be nervous of attending an individual interview, the girls were invited to bring a friend or support person along. This person was subject to the same consent, confidentiality and ethical procedures as the participant.

Focus group sessions were based upon naturally forming groups of known acquaintances and friends thus providing participants with familiarity and comfort in a non-threatening environment, enhancing trust amongst members. Each group was facilitated by the Principal Researcher who is experienced working with young women, and the research field assistant, selected because of her relationship and rapport with the specific focus group. By involving a person familiar with the group participants, the research field assistant would be able to recognise signs of stress and offer further assistance to the participants. The focus group sessions began with the researcher outlining the structure of the session including ground rules about behaviour and confidentiality. It is recognised that confidentiality is impossible to guarantee in a group setting but by structuring the session using hypothetical scenarios, girls were able to participate without exposing personal information, unless they chose to do so.

Ethical issues concerning the questionnaire focus on protecting the anonymity of participants not wanting to participate. As noted above, those who chose not to participate were told to leave the questionnaire blank and deposit it in the collection box or envelope at the end of class.

#### **Ethical issue: Research involving Tangata Whenua participants**

This research focuses on the phenomena of young women's use of violence and anti-social behaviour. It is an exploration into a topic that New Zealand lacks knowledge about. It is not about ethnicity, yet in stating this, it is important to recognise that Te Tiriti o Waitangi places a particular responsibility on researchers when involving Tangata Whenua participants. It was the intention of this research to bring to the forefront a topic that has received little formal attention in academic study in New Zealand. It is hoped that this will support or enable the efforts of others, particularly from within Tangata Whenua, to engage in further study into specific aspects and specific needs of intervention that are culturally appropriate for Tangata Whenua.

Spoonley (2003), in a discussion of the challenges of cross cultural research, points out that it is not acceptable to impose research which may harm another culture and

research should enable empowerment, cooperation and collaboration. In attempt to establish collaboration and consultation, a working relationship was established with Kaumatua Judi Billens to help guide Stopping Violence Services Nelson and the Principal Researcher through the complexities of conducting this research in a culturally respectful way. Being mindful of the many demands placed on a Kaumatua, her time is valued, as she requested, through financial reimbursement. Her wisdom was crucial in liaising with local iwi to assist with consultation about the project, in the development of culturally appropriate resources to be given to Tangata Whenua participants and in the selection of suitable research field assistants. With a strong interest in the research topic, the Kaumatua also contributed to the analysis of findings.

The concepts of partnership, participation and protection are embedded within the Treaty of Waitangi. This research worked within these concepts by seeking direction from Tangata Whenua for the involvement of their young women, and in the case of the questionnaire, their young men, in this project. This included obtaining appropriate permission of iwi, hapu and whanau and directions as to the use and dissemination of findings. It also included the involvement of Tangata Whenua wherever possible in the research process and analysis. While Tangata Whenua are not the primary focus of the project, data was collected that was identifiable by ethnicity for general comparison. Participants were asked to name their iwi. However, the category of iwi was not a variable of the research analysis in order to protect the anonymity of the participants and to thwart presumptions. Participants were asked their iwi so that iwi specific findings, along with findings for all Tangata Whenua could be returned to Tangata Whenua who request this information.

Through the guidance of Kaumatua Judi Billens, a consultation Powhiri and Hui was held at Whakatu Marae, Nelson on 10 June 2009. The research was presented and permission given from Tangata Whenua to involve their children as participants in the research and discussion carried out regarding appropriate procedures and ownership of Tangata Whenua findings.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Geographically, this research was specific to the Tasman Police District, a very large jurisdiction that stretches across the top of the South Island from Kaikoura to Golden Bay and down the West Coast. The research should not be considered a representative sample of New Zealand; however it does share similar experiences with other locations in New Zealand. As a result, the information contained in this report will have relevance for many services involved with the welfare of young women.

This report records the findings from an exploration of teenage girls' involvement with violent and anti-social behaviour. It focuses on this phenomenon and for that reason it does not separate girls by demographic variables such as ethnicity, class or family structure, although it includes this diversity. This is to eliminate the possibility of unfounded comparisons or premature conclusions that would reach beyond the scope of this study. However, it is believed that the information contained in this report will help to generate future studies.

## WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE RESEARCH

### Questionnaires

The following section provides a brief overview of the young people who participated in the research by completing a questionnaire.

Great effort has been taken to protect the identity of the participants, their ethnicity, their schools and their communities. Therefore specific information is not given. This is to avoid unfounded speculation or misuse of the information in ways that could be detrimental to a participant and their family or whanau, or to an iwi, a school or community. However, principals and Boards of Trustees, who have requested, have received a confidential report of the questionnaire findings that were specific to their school. Where a significant amount of data was collected a community, Maori or iwi specific report can be obtained by their representatives contacting Stopping Violence Services Nelson.

### **Education Providers**

A total of 24 education providers in the Tasman Police District participated in the research by disseminating The Girls' Project questionnaire to their Year 9 and Year 10 male and female students. These included state, area, religious based, co-ed and single-sex schools, and their associated alternative education facilities, as well as home based and correspondence education programmes.

### **Sex**

A total of 3424 completed questionnaires were returned to the researchers. Of these, 1704 were from girls and 1720 from boys.

### **Age**

The age range of the students who completed the questionnaire was 12-17 years as outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1 – Age of students (questionnaires):**

<b>Age:</b>	<b>Number of Girls:</b>	<b>Number of Boys:</b>	<b>Total:</b>
12	31	16	47
13	614	489	1103
14	820	825	1645
15	194	296	490
16	5	4	9
17	6	9	15
Did not indicate	34	81	115
Overall Total	1704	1720	3424

### **Ethnicity**

The ethnicity of the students is outlined in Table 2. Students could indicate more than one ethnicity. Of the total participants, 587 students, 17.1% of the total, indicated their ethnicity as New Zealand Maori or to include New Zealand Maori. Of these, 217 specified their iwi; 66 iwi were represented.

**Table 2 – Ethnicity of students (questionnaires):**

<b>Ethnicity:</b>	<b>Number of Girls:</b>	<b>Number of Boys:</b>	<b>Total:</b>
New Zealander	1312	1262	2574
European	405	367	772
Asian	63	76	139
Pacific Islander	57	48	105
New Zealand Maori	298	289	587
Other	54	45	99

**Urban and Provincial**

For the purpose of analysis, students from urban centres with a population greater than 9000 were compared against those from smaller more provincial communities. A total of 2550 students are represented by the Urban group while the Provincial group consists of 874 students. Both the urban and provincial comparison groups included representation from education providers in the Nelson, Marlborough and West Coast areas of the Tasman Police District.

**Focus Group Discussions**

The following section provides a brief overview of the girls participating in 40 focus groups discussions.

Great effort has been taken to protect the identity of the girls who participated in this study. Therefore specific information about the girls, their familial situations and their communities is not presented. This is to avoid unfounded speculation or misuse of the information in ways that could be detrimental to the girl, her family, her whanau, her school or her community.

Initially the methodology intended that the focus group sample would consist of 20 groups of girls involved with 'anti-social behaviour' and 20 groups of girls deemed not involved. This was to allow the findings of the groups to be compared against each other. This process became problematic and forced the abandonment of the separate categories.

There were several reasons for this.

First, it became evident that some groups of girls were labelled as belonging to a particular category based on assumptions being made by those assisting with referrals because of the way the girls presented to them and that this did not accurately reflect the type of behaviour the girls described themselves being involved with.

*For example: A group of girls described by staff as 'nice ones', yet away from their view, the girls engaged in relational aggression, cyberbullying and physical violence towards those outside their clique.*

Secondly, some groups of girls were brought together at the discretion or convenience of the person or organisation arranging the discussion and therefore were discovered

at the commencement of the discussion as not being a 'naturally forming group' as the research methodology had stipulated.

*For example: Individual girls being brought together to form a group representing the 'difficult ones' created an unnaturally forming group where lack of personal familiarity hampered the discussion.*

Finally, membership within a naturally forming group of female friends often contained a wide range of differing behaviours therefore because the make up of the group was varied it did not fit the criteria of a distinct category.

*For example: Within a naturally forming group of girls there may be a central subgroup that engages in overt anti-social or violent behaviour while others are not actively involved possibly by choice, fear or lack of status.*

### **Age**

Focus group discussions involved girls between the ages of 12 and 18. Thirteen (32.5%) groups involved girls 12 years old and under, eight (20%) groups involved girls mainly between the ages of 13 to 14 years, ten (25%) groups included girls 15 and 16 and three (7.5%) groups involved girls 17 years and older. There were six (15%) groups that contained a wide range of ages.

### **Ethnicity**

The girls indicated their ethnicities to include New Zealand, Pakeha, Maori, Continental European, British Isles, Pacific Islanders, Indian, African and Asian.

### **Locations**

There were 18 interviews (45%) undertaken with girls residing in the larger urban centres with a population of 30,000 or more. The remainder came from smaller communities and provincial locations in the Tasman Police District.

### **Access**

Twenty-nine (72.5%) groups volunteering to be involved in the research were from a school environment. They represented group types which included teammates, club members, student council representatives, seniors or junior representatives, whanau classmates, as well as less formal groups who referred to themselves as "BFFs" (best friends forever), "friends since primary", "we hangout together", "people call us the sluts", "the smokers", or "the tough girls". Access to these groups of girls came through school staff or the girls volunteered directly to the researchers.

Eleven (27.5%) groups came from outside the school environment and included formal and informal social groups, associated with church, recreation or youth services, as well as family or whanau sets or friend groups without a common school link. Access to these groups of girls was assisted by community services and agencies, or the girls volunteered directly to the researchers.

### **Data collection**

The majority of the focus groups were video taped for the researchers to review. In most cases a research assistant participated in the group discussion, however this was deemed unnecessary and counterproductive in small groups with only 3 or 4 participants where too many 'adults' might effect the girls' comfort level.

Mature females with training in social services were sought to assist within the focus groups. These women included social workers in schools, community social workers, kuia, school guidance counsellors and senior students completing a recognised social work qualification.

### **In-depth Interviews**

The following section provides a brief overview of the girls participating in the 104 in-depth interviews.

Great effort has been taken to protect the identity of the girls who participated in this study. Therefore specific information about the girls, their familial situations and their communities is not presented. This is to avoid unfounded speculations or misuse of the information in ways that could be detrimental to the girl, her family, her whanau, her school or her community.

The majority of these girls came to the attention of the researcher because they had engaged in violent behaviour or had experienced violent behaviour. This behaviour included unprovoked attacks involving peers and adults, grievous assaults causing serious injury, stalking, verbal harassment, cyber bullying and school yard or street fights. Gang association through family members and friends was also recorded for some.

### **Age**

In-depth interviews were carried out with girls between the ages of 12 and 18 years, with girls between 14 and 16 years making up the bulk of those interviewed at 72%.

**Table 3 – Age of students (interviews):**

<b>Age:</b>	<b>Number:</b>	<b>Percentage:</b>
12	1	0.9%
13	6	5.8%
14	20	19.2%
15	24	23.1%
16	31	29.8%
17	16	15.4%
18	6	5.8%
Total	104	100%

### **Ethnicity**

The girls indicated their ethnicities to include New Zealand, Pakeha, Maori, Continental European, British Isles, Pacific Islanders, Indian, and Asian.

### **Sexuality**

The girls were not asked to indicate their sexual orientation. However the interviews include comments from several girls who identified as lesbian or bisexual. Of these, one girl spoke about engaging in violence within her same sex intimate relationship.

### **Locations**

Half of the interviews were collected from girls residing in the larger urban centres with a population of 30,000 or more. The remainder came from smaller communities and Provincial locations in the Tasman District including Golden Bay, Marlborough and along the East and West Coast of the South Island and the interior regions.

However, many girls commented that they had moved residence in their early teenage years. This included shifting from other areas in the Tasman Region, the North Island or from Christchurch. Several were transient and had temporary living arrangements with friends, family or whanau. While others alternated their residence between the family home and a boyfriend living in a different location and some were boarding at a particular location for the purpose of attending education facilities, work centres or for seasonal employment.

Of those still engaged in education, a considerable number of girls had changed schools amidst their high school years. This included switching schools in the same city, moving to a school in a different part of the region, attending alternative education facilities or starting correspondence education programmes at home.

### **Referrals**

Access was gained to the girls through referrals made by Police staff, particularly youth aid officers and truancy personnel; lawyers with clients before the courts; school staff, in particular guidance counsellors, social workers, principals and assistant principals, year deans and teachers; staff from non-government community services including Marae programmes, religious organisations and neighbourhood social centres. There were also several self-referrals from girls who learned about the research from the research website, peer networks or parents or whanau.

As expected, many girls were well-known in the community because of their behaviour; consequently multiple referrals were often made for the same girl.

### **Online questionnaire**

The online questionnaire operated from November 2009 to November 2010, and was located at [www.thegirlsproject.org.nz](http://www.thegirlsproject.org.nz). It consisted of 58 questions formatted as drop down menus, plus 3 demographic questions also formatted as drop down menus and a section for participants to add in any comments.

The purpose of including the questionnaire on The Girls' Project website was twofold as it was to provide interested parties access to the questions that formed the quantitative aspect of the research. In addition, the questionnaire provided an interactive tool for people, ideally young people, visiting the website to have the opportunity to participate in the research. As the website allowed free access to all members of the public, the validity and reliability of the results of the online questionnaire were considered tentative by the research team. Therefore these results will not be included in the quantitative report and serve only as a minor contribution to the overall analysis by providing the researchers further responses.



## **DISCUSSION**

In writing this report choices had to be made about what to include. The research project yielded much information. In an attempt to give priority to the voices of the girls, to let them lead us in our understanding, the academic comment that surrounds these issues has been limited. This, it was decided, could be covered in the publications that will follow. Before you is a journey into the world of girl fighting.

## **THE NATURE OF GIRLS' VIOLENT AND ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR**

### **Introduction**

Underwood (2003) introduces the labyrinth of labels that have been used to describe adolescent violence and anti-social behaviour. She has identified over 200 descriptions of physical aggression and provides a sample list of subtypes of aggression that includes “antisocial versus prosocial”, “targeted versus target less”, “rational versus manipulative”, “physical versus non physical”, “indirect versus direct” (p. 17). Each label reflects a particular perspective of analysis.

In an attempt to simplify the language associated with youth violence, while also being pragmatic, this discussion emulates the common way girls' violence proceeds. It begins with the topical theme of relational aggression and extends to include the less considered behaviours of sexual harassment, racial harassment and technology based aggression. With this as the background, focus turns to verbal fighting and physical aggression, both of which play a significant role in the lead up to a physical fight. While the intensifying of aggressive behaviour is presented here as a continuum, the phases can be difficult to identify especially because they can vary in duration. Some girls may never go beyond relational aggression and persist with this behaviour for months, even years, yet for others it only takes minutes to reach the stage of throwing the first punch after receiving a dirty look and being ‘called on’ by another girl.

Where applicable, a quantitative summary, reflecting findings gathered from the questionnaires completed by Year 9 and 10 boys and girls is provided. This data supports a gender comparison as well as reflecting differences noted between urban and provincial schools. The discussion of the theme then extends to include qualitative findings gathered from the focus groups, individual interviews and the comment section of the questionnaires. Where possible the girls' own stories and words are used to illustrate the discussion. To protect their identity their name and personal details have been changed.

### **The beginning**

#### **Relational Aggression**

Relational aggression, as defined by Pronk and Zimmer-Gembeck (2010) includes “negative social behaviours that are intended to harm relationships, social roles and/or social standing” (p. 176). While it usually begins with an individual disliking another, peers join in, hence it becomes an ‘us’ against ‘them’ scenario. It takes on verbal and non verbal actions that isolate, manipulate and humiliate targeted individuals and often diminishes their comfort amongst peers and their confidence in establishing new or maintaining existing friend relationships. It can include sexual harassment and technology based aggression, which will be considered in this discussion. Relational aggression is generally covert in nature therefore difficult for the victim to prove and for others to appreciate the gravity of the behaviour. The impact of relational aggression varies greatly but can include acts of retaliation, withdrawal from school and severe mental health issues.

Much of the relational aggression girls described in the research involved negative chitchat about other girls. Many commented that they had been hurt when friends

breached their trust and contributed their secrets to the gossip round. Others spoke of how, as a means of gaining personal attention, a girl would add unfounded information to her contribution and, often to circumvent recantation, cited another peer as the source.

*Mainly it's just people spreading horrible rumours and blaming innocent people on starting them.* Female, 13, Questionnaire comment

The spreading of rumours inflicted emotional pain, which, for some girls, was the reason why they chose relational aggression over physical violence.

*Like you can plan it and it's more convincing and, like evil in a way, instead of confrontational, and it makes it you can just watch how it makes it hard for the other person instead of just physically hurting them.* Huia, 17, #48

Boys also commented on the damaging nature of gossip.

*Rumours are spread quickly like fire so heaps of people find out in a little time. Secrets are something to be kept secret.* Male, 14, Questionnaire comment

Sometimes the relational aggression did not involve words but noises, snickers and gestures.

*I woofed at her one day like barking at her when she was walking past.* Sammie, 14, #53

### Experience of Relational Aggression

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated their experience, in the last year, of receiving behaviour from their peers that involved disparaging and manipulating actions, embarrassing comments and disclosures, exclusion and indirect harassment. We describe this as relational aggression.

- 90.8% of all<sup>1</sup> students (93.5% of all girls<sup>2</sup> and 88.1% of all boys<sup>3</sup>) report being subject to some form of relational aggression in the last year.
- 92.6% of students (95.4% of girls and 89.8% of boys) in provincial schools report being subject to some form of relational aggression.
- 90.2% of students (92.8% of girls and 87.5% of boys) in urban schools report being subject to some form of relational aggression.

<sup>1</sup> All students means total number of students who completed a questionnaire ie: 3424 students.

<sup>2</sup> All girls means total number of girls who completed a questionnaire ie: 1704 girls.

<sup>3</sup> All boys means total number of boys who completed a questionnaire ie: 1720 boys.

### Engaged in Relational Aggression

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated they engaged, in the last year, in delivering behaviour to their peers that involved disparaging and manipulating actions, embarrassing comments and disclosures, exclusion and indirect harassment. We describe this as relational aggression.

- 82.0% of all students (85.2% of all girls and 78.7% of all boys) reported subjecting another person to some form of relational aggression in the last year.
- 86.3% of students (89.1% of girls and 83.4% of boys) in provincial schools report subjecting another person to some form of relational aggression.
- 80.5% of students (83.9% of girls and 77.1% of boys) in urban schools report subjecting another person to some form of relational aggression.

The quantitative data contained in the information above indicates high levels of relational aggression occurring among Year 9 and 10 boys and girls. It also identifies that many adolescents have been both victims of relational aggression and perpetrators of the same behaviour. While girls appear to engage in and experience this behaviour more than boys, the difference is relatively small. The fact that the data shows slightly more involvement from youth in provincial schools than urban schools indicates this phenomenon is not limited by geography. These findings raise a number of points that need to be considered in a discussion of youth violence.

The common occurrence of relational aggression suggests that this type of anti-social behaviour is becoming normalised among Year 9 and 10 students. If relational aggression is the starting point on the continuum of girls' violence then the possibility of escalation of physically aggressive behaviour is an imperative concern.

Relational aggression, with its backstabbing, gossiping and eye rolling, has commonly been considered the territory of females. Yet the findings of this questionnaire indicate that young males are also caught up in this behaviour. There is minimal academic literature to illuminate the implications for boys who experience or initiate relational aggression with other boys as well as with girls. This topic is worthy of its own gender specific investigation.

As the socialisation process includes children emulating the behaviours of significant adults in their lives, the use of relational aggression by a wide number of young people suggests this behaviour is practiced, and potentially deemed acceptable by those who are influential to our young people. This would inevitably include family members, teachers, media and sports celebrities. Also worth considering is that younger siblings will often copy the behaviour of their older brother or sister, therefore the potential exists for an upsurge in the use of relational aggression by those at a younger age. The impact of relational aggression can be far reaching, as shown in the young people's comments that have been included here. The common occurrence of this behaviour

heightens the potential for the well being of many young people to be harmed if measures are not in place to prevent this behaviour or to increase resilience to its impact.

### **Sexual harassment**

Sexual harassment is addressed separately here to highlight the significant role it can play in contributing directly to relational aggression. As stated above, *The Girls' Project* questionnaire identified high levels of relational aggression among boys and girls of Years 9 and 10 and the qualitative data noted that relational aggression occurred between both same and opposite gender peers. While the quantitative aspect of the project did not obtain data pertaining specifically to sexual harassment, the topic surfaced alongside relational aggression during the girls' focus groups and individual interviews.

Reviewing Fineran and Bolen's (2006) study of sexual harassment amongst teenagers has highlighted an obvious omission in the literature pertaining to sexual harassment as an element of relational aggression. For the benefit of this discussion sexual harassment under New Zealand legislation refers to unwelcome and offensive comments, actions or visual material of a sexual nature that are directed at a individual.

The topic of sexual harassment among adolescents has taken a backseat to discussions of the situation in the workplace or tertiary education, for example The Human Rights Commission's (2009) *School Violence: Bully and Abuse* report provides no mention of sexual harassment and only a brief recommendation that schools be supported to "prevent sexual and other abuse" (p. 4). In addition, the dominant discourse surrounding sexual harassment focuses on adult males as the perpetrators. As a consequence there has been limited consideration for the impact of sexual harassment on adolescent peer relationships. Adding weight to the importance of this theme is the recognition that the sexual harassment being discussed here is occurring at a very challenging stage of adolescent development. The qualitative findings of *The Girls' Project* demonstrates a link between sexual harassment and girls' violence: Girl violence instigated by boy-to-girl sexual harassment; girls as victims of girl to girl sexual harassment; girls as perpetrators of the same. (The experience of boys as victims of sexual harassment is beyond the scope of this project, and is worthy of its own investigation.)

### **The experience of boy-to-girl sexual harassment.**

Many adolescent girls commented about the teasing and taunting they received from male peers, particularly during the intermediate and early high school years. The description of this behaviour included overt comments, jokes or gestures coming from an individual boy and groups of boys about a girl's appearance, body size, hygiene, sexuality and sexual behaviour. At times this took the form of a threat or a persuasion in an endeavour to get a girl to succumb to a sexual suggestion. Alternatively, boys engaged in physical actions such as groping, touching or attempting to dislodging a girls' clothing. Because this behaviour happened so frequently, many girls normalised it as an unavoidable part of school culture and some girls retaliated with their own verbal taunts. From a distance this behaviour appears innocuous with some girls commenting that they did not mind it, while others deeply objected.

*Like Bob thinks I'm sleeping with my own (family member), even though that's fucken gross and I would never do that. And he's been telling everybody that I've been sleeping with my (family member) and that I've been sleeping with Andrew, this dude that I used to like. I don't even like him anymore and he thinks that I'm sleeping with them two. So yeah, that just made me fucked off so I wanted to bash him. Enya, 15, #45*

*Two boys frustrated me so much I hid in the toilet for two hours...Teasing about personal stuff, stalk my house...Alone boys ok but together scary. These boys talk about rape so girls are scared. Focus group participant*

The implications of these actions are concerning for two reasons. First, Klein (2006) along with Fineran and Bolen (2006) stress that boy-to-girl sexual harassment is part of a continuum that includes dating violence, sexual assault and family violence, as well as retaliation, hence there is good reason for serious consideration. But more to the point of this study, girls who receive, wanted or unwanted, attention of a sexual nature from boys, are potential targets of relational aggression from their female peers. This may be because the girls are competing for the same male attention and therefore are jealous, or they are embarrassed by the sexual nature of their peer's interaction, or they are annoyed at the immaturity of this occurrence which can be a distraction from the activity at hand.

As a consequence of boy-to-girl sexual harassment, girls who receive more than their fair share of male attention can be quickly labelled by other girls as sluts, slags, skanks, hoes, tramps, easy and become the central focus in the gossip circles. Not only does the girl endure the anti-social behaviour of her male peer but she is on the receiving end of abuse from female peers. As this report will go on to show, the intensified emotions caused by such situations easily ignites girl fighting as rumours flourish and reputations are defended.

#### **Rose's Story**

Rose is a 12 year old girl who looks 18. A group of four boys, several years older than her, constantly hassle her in the school yard and sometimes in the classroom when the teacher is not looking. The boys ask Rose about the size of her breasts, whether she has had sex, if she is on her period because they think she smells or they grab her hand and put it on the front of their pants. Then they tell everyone that Rose felt them up. On the way home from school they knocked her to the ground and held her down, while threatening to undo her buttons. She fought back, throwing punches and yelling swear words. Other girls watched on, they did not help her and instead they said she deserved it because she is a skank. Rose is in trouble at school because she attacked one of these girls. She has no girl friends and has started to enjoy the company of boys instead. She has found that she can get free cigarettes from them if she lets them touch her breasts and that way she always has lots of boy friends.

### **The experience of girl-to-girl sexual harassment**

Sexual harassment between persons of the same gender is often assumed to (1) be between homosexual individuals, or (2) involve homophobic behaviour directed at a same gender individual whose sexuality is being challenged. The scenario of same gender sexual harassment that may come to mind is that of a young male being taunted for behaviour that does not embrace the societal norms of masculinity. In a similar way, girl-to-girl sexual harassment is about contributing to and perpetuating a hostile environment that sanctions girls who are viewed as operating outside the realm of social acceptability (Waldron, 2006). Amongst the adolescent girls of the project, this behaviour was marked by singling out a girl who did not conform to her expected gender role by flouting conventional feminine interests or dress, or being too overtly heterosexual or not being obviously heterosexual enough.

Those who did not display enough femininity or obvious heterosexuality, found themselves subjected to girl-to-girl sexual harassment which attempted to humiliate and alienate them by highlighting their difference or what was deemed as their deficiency. This sexual harassment took the form of homophobic labelling, such as calling her a lessie, homo, queer as well as insinuations of bestiality, substandard genitalia and speculations of incestuous relationships.

*A girl with out a boyfriend is called a lesbian. Focus group comment*

*I was called a lesbian last year coz I wasn't interested in doing stuff with guys. I don't see how that would make me a lesbian. I'm not interest in doing stuff with girls either. Kim, 14, #91*

The more common theme of girl-to-girl sexual harassment focuses on bringing down or breaking the confidence of a girl who was viewed to be over-stepping the standard of acceptable heterosexual pursuit, particularly if her behaviour was thought to be giving her an advantage in gaining attention or popularity from boys. This sexual harassment included publically commenting on a girls' suspected sexual behaviour, judging her as a sexual object and branding her with a derogatory label, such as a slut, whore, or slag.

*Coz some girls just try too hard to get boys...Oh yeah they wear their really short skirts like here (points to top of thigh). When they bend over you'd be able to see their arse...We're like 'slut' and then she turns around to see who it was. Enya, 15, #45*

*Most of the (school name) girls cheat with the (school name) girls' boyfriends. They think they are hot shit, like sluts and stuff. Focus group comment*

### **Racial harassment**

Racial harassment featured as an aspect of relational aggression in the qualitative findings. The questionnaires recorded several comments about the situation for Asian boys and girls.

*The picking on is often racial Asian comments but it can get quite hurt. Male, 13, Questionnaire comment*

During the qualitative interviews girls spoke about ongoing racial harassment that centred on many Maori girls as well as those of Asian and African descent. Occasionally, girls commented that while they appeared Caucasian like many of their classmates, they received harassment because of their different ethnicity, accent or religious or spiritual beliefs.

*They call us niggers...We're Maori, we're not niggers, nobody is a nigger. We think its mean because there is an African American girl here...Last year it was nigger, nigger, nigger. Kerre, 15, #28*

*My friend...Was about the same colour as me...Like some of the racist comments were "Hi turd burglar" and stuff like 'black sheep'. Dani, 16, #59*

Like sexual harassment, racial harassment contributes to relational aggression and is therefore part of the continuum of violence that girls, and boys, endure. This is an area worthy of further investigation.

*Racism, girls and boys being racist to other girls because of where they are from or their skin colour. Female, 15, Questionnaire comment*

### **Technology based aggression**

No longer do girls need to be in the same classroom to pass notes, or attend the same school to read insults scrawled on the toilet door, or walk home together to share gossip. Modern technology allows relational aggression to be carried out at a distance. Technology based aggression is commonly referred to as cyber bullying, which Campbell (2005) describes as using email, text, chat rooms, mobile phones, mobile phone cameras and web sites as the medium to harass, threaten and humiliate others by disseminating derogatory or confidential material.

*I've actually been one of the people that have put around about a fight and stuff like that and who won...The result of it, like who won and stuff like that but that's because it was (a family member) and she won and I wanted like everyone to know my (family member) was tough...It made people say to that person that lost, "Ah, you're weak, you can't fight"...And it made the person that did it like even more angrier and stuff and there's like more rounds. People saying "Yeah you can smash her, just try it once more". Sue, 16, #43*

*My boyfriends ex girl friend would text "going to beat you up". Focus group comment*

A considerable amount of literature has been written that outlines young women's involvement in cyber bullying. With this in mind, this section will not restate that which many are aware of, instead emphasis has been given to the lesser known ways technology is used to express a girl's aggression.

The quantitative findings outlined in the following section indicate that girls are more involved with the 'darker' side of technology than boys and that the convenience provided by mobile phones and the internet means that distance and geography do not buffer involvement with this form of aggressive behaviour. Although some girls



commented they had limited internet access or mobile phone coverage at home, they could easily obtain it at school or at a friend's place. Nearly all the girls who participated in the interviews or focus groups had at least one mobile phone. It was not uncommon for some to have two and one girl carried four phones, each with varying settings and capabilities.

### **Experience of cyber bullying**

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated their experience, in the last year, of receiving behaviour from their peers that involved cyber bullying. This encompassed mean or threatening messages being sent, via texting, emails or posting on social networking sites, directly to the person or to other peers about this person.

- 35.8% of all students (41.4% of all girls and 30.2% of all boys) report being subject to some form of cyber bullying in the last year.
- 37.0% of students (44.2% of girls and 29.9% of boys) in provincial schools report being subject to some form of cyber bullying.
- 35.4% of students (40.1% of girls and 30.3% of boys) in urban schools report being subject to some form of cyber bullying.

### **Engaged in cyber bullying**

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated they engaged, in the last year, in delivering behaviour to their peers that involved cyber bullying. This encompassed mean messages being sent, via texting, emails or posting on social networking sites, directly to the person or to other peers.

- 18.5% of all students (21.7% of all girls and 15.3% of all boys) report subjecting another person to some form of cyber bullying in the last year.
- 21.5% of students (25.7% of girls and 17.5% of boys) in provincial schools report subjecting another to some form of cyber bullying.
- 17.4% of students (20.3% of girls and 14.5% of boys) in urban schools report subjecting another to some form of cyber bullying.

Technology based aggression extends beyond sending mean text messages or posting derogatory comments on an internet site. It can also including the sharing of private information without the owner's permission, creating the potential for the owner to fall victim to abuse and harassment. Passing on private phone numbers serves as entertainment for some girls who are intent on deceiving a peer. It works in two ways:

(1) a girl receives the phone number of a known boy who supposedly is interested in the girl and wants her to call. When the call is made the girl quickly realises that the boy either does not know who she is nor has little interest in her call and she is humiliated (2) A variation of this involves a girl being given the phone number of a boy she does not know. Assured by peers that the boy is 'nice', the girl initiates contact, unaware that she has been set up and the boy is not as portrayed by the peers. This can be a very dangerous prank as the following story highlights.

#### **Tessa's Story**

Tessa is a 15 year old girl. Her self esteem is a bit shaky because, like many adolescent girls, she considers herself not to be popular. She started to get text messages from boys she did not know. 'They texted me first and I was like what and I texted my friends from (place name) and asked them who are these guys and they were like "Oh he's a really hot guy from my school" and I was like, oh, ok.' Tessa texted the guys back and struck up cyber relationships. Several of these conversations progressed to the stage that Tessa arranged to see the guys. 'I trust (female peers) and then, hello, I was texting these old paedophiles and I met them face to face and I cried.' Her so-called friends had set her up for their entertainment. Authorities became involved in this situation as details unfolded about the men who had been pretending to be teenage boys. Her peers joke had put Tessa at serious risk of personal harm.

Through the use of technology girls could avoid taking ownership for their harassing or retaliatory actions. Pretending to be a girl they did not like, they could cause her harassment by using her name to book hotel rooms, order taxis or manipulate messages. In a similar manner some girls would steal, borrow or secretly use another girl's phone to text abusive messages, conveying the owner as responsible. Being very technology savvy, some girls used secreted moments at another person's computer as an opportunity to send emails to their enemies or rivals. Not only did this allow them to escape blame but it shifted culpability for the abusive action to another thereby adding weight to their attack against the recipient.

*It usually starts off with (female classmates) texting them off my phone and then I get the text and I'm like 'Who's this' and they're like "Whatever, you know who this is" and I go 'No, I don't', "Yes you do, you were texting me two seconds ago." And (classmates) laugh and run away. Kim, 14, #91*

Trying to avoid relational aggression by not engaging in technology driven correspondence can also present problems. For example, a girl who does not accept a social networking friend request or who chooses to ignore a suspect email can sometimes be viewed as being belligerent by the rejected girl. Feeling slighted, the rejected girl responds aggressively with an abusive reply or tells her mates how this girl snubbed her attempt at friendship. This results in further relational aggression. Paradoxically, some girls would not use the privacy setting on their social networking sites out of fear of being subjected to relational aggression for declining or limiting the access of other girls.

*I'll say 'Write back you dummy' and they won't write back and she'll be like just go away. Coz she's scared of me. Sammie, 14 #53*

### **The lead up**

In many situations the drama of relational aggression diminishes as girls move into new friendship circles, discover other interests or an intervention takes place, but in some cases the aggressive behaviour intensifies to incorporate physical aggression and verbal fighting. While both could be considered as an aspect of relational aggression, they have been separated here to illustrate a shift in confrontation, which moves a girl from behind the computer screen or the safety of her clique and places her into the arena of sparring directly with her rival. Physical aggression and verbal fighting can occur independently but they frequently are intertwined and often serve as a catalyst for a physical altercation between girls.

### **Physical aggression**

We refer to physical aggression as the use of physical presence or indirect bodily force towards a person or their personal possessions to intentionally cause harassment, intimidation, humiliation or provocation. Examples could include pushing a classmate into another person, knocking books off a student's desk, or 'keying' or scratching a peer's car. Girls sometimes referred to the use of physical presence as getting into their face, coming at them or not backing off.

### **Experience of physical aggression**

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated their experience, in the last year, of receiving behaviour from their peers that involved physical aggression. This encompassed intentional acts of damaging personal property or bumping into or throwing objects at the person.

- 68.3% of all students (57.6% of all girls and 79.0% of all boys) report being subject to some form of physical aggression in the last year.
- 73.4% of students (66.9% of girls and 79.8% of boys) in provincial schools report being subject to some form of physical aggression.
- 66.6% of students (54.4% of girls and 78.7% of boys) in urban schools report being subject to some form of physical aggression.

### Engaged in physical aggression

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated they engaged, in the last year, in delivering behaviour towards their peers that involved physical aggression. This encompassed intentional acts of damaging personal property, bumping up against or throwing objects at a person.

- 58.5% of all students (47.5% of all girls and 69.5% of all boys) report instigating some form of physical aggression in the last year.
- 66.0% of students (58.3% of girls and 73.5% of boys) in provincial schools report physical aggression.
- 56.0% of students (43.8% of girls and 68.1% of boys) in urban schools report physical aggression.

The quantitative findings outlined in the section above indicate that a significant number (73.4%) of students in Year 9 and 10 have experienced physical aggression, and more than half (66%) admitted to engaging in this behaviour. While these findings reveal a slightly greater use of physical aggression reported amongst students of the provincial schools, they also highlight that in all situations boys were more involved than girls. This is not an unexpected result as the association of boys to physical activities and girls to social or relationship based activities is well discussed in academic literature, which draws on explanations of difference ranging from socialisation to hormones. However these conventional gender associations have overshadowed significant consideration being given to female involvement in physical aggression or violence and, while our findings indicate that girls are not as involved in physical aggression as boys, some are, nonetheless, involved.

*I hit (name)...She actually did nothing we just hate her...I seen her in the canteen and I was like, Oh my god there's (name), walked past her and then boom. Right into the back of the head and then she balled her eyes out. Sammie, 14, #53*

Physical aggression is reported in this study as holding a place on the continuum of girls' violence toward other girls that starts with relational aggression and can end with physical violence. Considering the high level of relational aggression in our findings, the potential for physical aggression is significantly extended. It is note worthy that girls' use of physical aggression towards boys and adults is an issue of concern, although not central to this study.

*One night we were on the bus and some chick just reached through the window and grabbed for this other chick's hair when the bus was moving and just like hard out pulling her hair. Sarah, 16, #83*

*I would punch back if they shoved me. Focus group comment*

### Verbal fighting

As the quantitative findings show in the section below, half of the boys and girls surveyed in this study indicated involvement in a verbal fight with a peer, with slightly more responses from those associated with provincial schools. The findings also pointed out that same gender verbal fights were most common, although girls, more than boys, engaged in cross gender verbal fighting.

*It is not physical, it is verbal with most teenage girls. Female, 13, Questionnaire comment*

### Involvement in verbal fighting

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated, in the last year, their involvement in a verbal fight with male and/or female peers. Due to the complexity of the interactions surrounding verbal fighting, the questionnaire did not ask participants to specify if they were the recipient or the instigator but rather their involvement.

- 65.2% of all students (70.4% of provincial students and 63.4% of urban students) report having one or more verbal fights with a teenage peer in the last year.
- Of those involved in verbal fighting, 51.8% were girls and 49.2% were boys
- Of these girls, 94.9% had verbally fought with other girls and 55.4% with boys. (Note: some fought with both boys and girls.)
- Of these boys, 39.3% had verbally fought with girls and 96.3% with other boys. (Note: some fought with both boys and girls.)

The subject of verbal fighting among girls is not easily found in the academic literature, instead researchers, such as Underwood (2003) focus on verbal aggression, that is yelling, insulting, threatening, harm name-calling and teasing. As such, this aligns with the concept of relational aggression that was discussed previously. However this understanding falls short of the true intensity of a verbal fight that is showcased here to emphasise what girls of this study referred to as 'having a go'.

*They were more talk than action. Like if things come down to it, we would talk to them but then if they starting to have a go at you, like give you lip and stuff, that's when you'd like do physical action... Well just some people would go up there, talk to them, ask them what their problem is. Why they're talking like talking shit and stuff like that and then if they got the answer then they'd leave and just say, "don't say anything else, it's not a talking you're getting next, it's a hiding". And then that's when things would stop and then some girls starts saying "Yeah, I did say that and you are this" and then blah blah blah and stuff like that so then that's when they would start physical action. Sue, 16, #43*

*I can be very verbally abusive to people when they piss me off but I'm not like physical, I'm more violent with verbal. Diane, 13, #84*

A verbal fight is the confrontational heated exchange of words between individuals; albeit they may be surrounded by a group of vociferous peers. Such an exchange lasts for a period of time and is frequently judged by peers and those involved as having a winner. As noted earlier, verbal fighting is often accompanied by physical aggression and for some girls they adopt a demeanour of bravado or posturing to serve as reinforcement for their verbal message.

*My voice ain't obviously getting into your head so maybe my fist will. Sammie, 14, #53*

A verbal fight between girls can take on the nature of a competitive word duel that has girls attempting to match or better each other's insult or comment.

*Verbal fight, there's always abuse. Like, trying to match what they say, like 'fuck you, you stupid f'ing slut, go die'. Focus group comment*

A verbal fight can bring with it a sense of entertainment that has some girls looking for opportunities to 'stir shit'. This is where the winner is determined by the person who does not back down or can make the other girl cry, which is taken as a show of weakness, or who has the 'balls' to take it to the next level (physical).

*I like to stir shit sometimes, thought she would be too scared to come after me because I am big. But when she came up to me, ah what, ah shit! I say catch you up later. Kerre, 15, #28*

Some girls chose to substitute a verbal fight for a physical one to avoid the risk of bruises or broken teeth. This 'safer' strategy was not always successful, as the verbal altercation sometimes intensified the aggression of her opponent, ensuring there would be a future physical challenge. Girls also opt for a verbal fight to minimise any strife that may result with school staff or police. Many girls held the perception that verbal fighting would not be deemed as serious as physical, therefore a resulting reprimand or punishment would be less severe. In a similar manner, some girls considered a verbal fight as the ground work required to ignite a physically violent reaction from an opponent. If the opponent threw the first punch, then their retaliation could be justified to officials as being a case of self defence.

*They'd come up to you and they'd be like "Yep, come on, bring it on, do you want to fight then?" Diane, 13, #84*

### **Lisa's Story**

Fourteen year old Lisa wants to be an air hostess but she is having a bit of trouble at school. She loves a good verbal fight. It gives her a "buzz" and there is rarely a day that she would let go by without a good argument. She liked to lash other girls with her words until they 'shut down inside'. She considered that to be an 'awesome' win. She also likes it when she winds a girl to the point of hitting out at her. Then she has a reason to hit back. 'She hit me first...I'm not going to get into as much trouble.' Lisa's ability with words has earned her quite a reputation. 'Everyone thinks I'm going to give them a hiding if they get smart. Like yesterday I got into trouble for something I didn't even do because this girl was too scared to come to school because of me. Coz I told her that I suggest she doesn't come back. But that wasn't coz she was going to get a hiding. But she's not going to have anyone at school anymore coz nobody likes her anymore. And she took it the wrong way.'

However in many of the interviews, girls spoke about verbal fighting as a prominent precursor to their physical reaction. By getting caught up in the intensity of a verbal exchange they found themselves engaging in unintentional physical assault, thus moving their aggression further along the continuum of behaviour.

*I kinda lost it. I was just really angry and it was just lies she was just saying, really stupid stuff...And she said something and I got really, it annoyed me and I had a go at her and then she was having a go back at me. Like we got kinda close to each other and, like, I had her, she was up against the stairs. I kinda backed her into it and then I just, like, my arm was physically flying forward and hitting her. Lareen, 14, #21*

*Then she hit me up in town...I was sitting at (café) and she just came in with one of her other mates and sat down at the table and was just accusing me of it and trying to get in my face and stuff. And she was like "tell me the truth" or something and I said I had and she was like "So what am I going to do about it" and I said 'I don't know what is there to do about it coz I've just told you the truth' and then she tried to tip a glass of water in my face. So straight away I was like 'Fuck, what are you doing' and went like that (a slap gesture). But I didn't actually really mean to hit her just get her out of my face kind of thing coz she was just in my face and I don't like that very much when people do that. And then she pushed me off the chair so I got up and kept pulling her hair and I was just ripping on her hair and she couldn't really do much...The boss called the cops. Lindsay, 16, #58*

It is particularly with verbal fighting that girls' opponents also extended to include male peers, family members, as well as teachers.

### **Physical Fighting**

This discussion of girls' involvement in physical fighting marks the final phase of our continuum of girl fighting. As the table below indicates girls reported 34.8% involvement in physical fighting while 65.2% for boys was significantly greater. These

figures align with New Zealand Police statistics for violent offending by youth under 17 years. As has been the pattern throughout this study, the provincial students indicated more involvement. The quantitative findings also showed that boys mainly partook in same gender altercations, while girls engaged in same gender and to a lesser extent cross gender fighting.

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### Physical fighting

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated their experience, in the last year, of being involved in a physical fight with their male and/or female peers.

- 35.3% of all students (42.4% of provincial students and 32.9% of urban students) report having one or more physical fights with a teenage peer in the last year.
  - Of those students who indicated involvement in physical fighting, 34.8% or 421 were girls and 65.2% or 789 were boys.
  - Of these girls, 83.4% or 351 had physically fought with other girls and 52.0% or 291 with boys. (Note: some fought with both boys and girls.)
  - Of these boys, 8.1% or 64 had physically fought with girls and 98.1% or 774 with other boys. (Note: some fought with both boys and girls.)
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Until recently the seriousness of physical fighting among females has been undermined by the stereotype of a 'catfight' that often humorously depicted young women engaged in flailing arms and hair pulling. Discussion of the topic of female physical fighting is now surfacing among academics, however through a survey of the literature it became evident that the issue of a physical fight between girls is treated as a single entity with no consideration for what girls actually do in such an altercation. The necessity of gaining this depth of understanding will aid future considerations for prevention and intervention.

Throughout this research, many young women spoke about physical fighting among girls. The potential of involvement in a physical fight was a reality that most acknowledged, many had managed and some had experienced. While physical fighting was a common topic, it was in no way a motivation or the goal of many girls.

Although girls do not engage in physical fighting to the same amount as boys, their fights include actions that can and sometimes do inflict serious injury. Throughout the research the word 'hiding' surfaced frequently. Girls were scared of getting one, or told of giving one or threatened others with one. One girl explained what she considered a hiding to be: *"When people like punch you until you bleed. You get bruises all over your face or over your body. People are kicking you. When you get a hiding you just fall to the ground and you can't get back up or you're knocked out and you just*



*can't, you don't wake up for ages."* Ally, 14, #66. Hidings appear to be an extreme form of an altercation and, as girls described their physical fights, it became apparent that a range of violent actions were employed.

For some girls the initial reaction to a verbal affront was a slap to their opponent's face. Although described as a 'bitch slap' by one girl, whose experience with girl fighting included a repertoire of fighting manoeuvres, it often incited further violence.

*So I stood up and I bitch slapped her and then she stood up and pushed me so I jumped over the desk and I just started hitting her...* Ally, 14, #66

Other girls described hitting or pushing a rival with the force that would knock them to the ground. Once on the ground, they endured kicks to the body or head, being pinned down by being sat on, punches particularly to the face and pushing the head or face into the underlying surface.

*I was like bashing her, punching her in the face and slamming her head into the concrete and it was, I just did it because she like was saying other things that I told her not to say to other people which she just lost my trust, yeah she just made me angry...But now we're like friends.* Della, 16, #27

*I pushed her to the ground and then my mates started bashing her and kicking her in the head.* Nat, 16, #62

*I shoved her heaps and heaps and heaps and had her round by the neck and I was about to punch the shit out of her until all these teachers came and ripped me off her.* Nikki, 17, #20

Girls described girl fights that involved acts of violence requiring considerable physical strength, like dragging a girl along the ground by her hair or pulling a girl through a car window.

*She pulled her out of the car, window was down that much (indicates approximately half way), she pulled her out of the car by her hair and just smashed the shit out of her and broke three ribs.* Mere, 16, #19

It was rare for girls to talk of using weapons in their physical fights, and while several were familiar with firearms; these were not used for physical fighting. Instead girls spoke of their spontaneous reactions that caused them to throw whatever was in their hand at the time, this included fizz or beer cans, drinking glasses or, in one case, a beaker of acid during a science class.

*I'm one of those people that doesn't really react and it kind of bottles up, yeah, we were doing some kind of chemistry practical test and it had something to do with various strengths of acid and she was just being completely stupid and bumping me all the time so I'd get some on my hand, you know, that sort of thing and so I pretty much dramatically and very angrily declared to the world that I was leaving school and I had a beaker with about quarter, about half a cup of acid in it and I chucked it at her.* Chrys, 17, #57

The few girls who did describe using a weapon referred to the use of an object such as a beer bottle held in the hand, or a knife pulled from a kitchen drawer.

#### Charlotte's Story

A drunken weekend landed 16-year old Charlotte in a heap of trouble. With seven bottles gone out of a box of 12, she received a text challenging her to a fight. The reason why escapes her now. She recalls an argument when her female opponent tried to take a swing at her but only skimmed her face, then Charlotte lashed out and hit her, knocking her backwards. The girl swung again connecting with Charlotte's nose; Charlotte did not even feel it. She was on a real adrenalin rush and bent down and picked up a beer bottle that she had earlier dropped on the ground. With the bottle in her hand, Charlotte smashed it on her opponents face, splitting her brow as the bottle broke in half. On reflection Charlotte comments that being in a fight isn't a nice thing, she recognised she could have seriously injured the other girl and quietly commented that if only she had stopped to think.

#### **A climate of violence**

A review of the quantitative findings presented in this discussion, lead us to reflect on the significant level of violence and anti-social behaviour in the lives of Year 9 and 10 students. We describe these compiled findings, as displayed in the information outlined in the section below, as a 'climate of peer related violence'. Reiterating what was stated early in this report, majority involvement from these students suggests a normalizing of this type of behaviour, and highlights the potential for acceptance or a resignation to its existence, perpetuation and perpetration.

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#### **Involvement in a climate of peer related violence.**

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated, in the last year, their involvement, either as instigator or recipient, in a climate of peer violence. Based on the 5 categories above: Relational aggression, verbal fighting, cyber bullying, physical aggression and physical fighting.

- 97.6% of all students (97.6% of all girls and 97.7% of all boys) report involvement in a climate of peer related violence
  - 98.5% of students (98.4% of girls and 98.6% of boys) in provincial schools report involvement in a climate of peer related violence.
  - 97.3% of students (97.3% of girls and 97.3% of boys) in urban schools report involvement in a climate of peer related violence.
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The qualitative aspect of the research has allowed us a deeper understanding of the types of violent and anti-social behaviours used by some girls. With this as background, this report now gives further consideration to those who become involved with girls' violence.

## WHEN GIRLS USE VIOLENT AND ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

This discussion focuses on two different, yet related areas that contribute to our awareness of the variation that exists in girls' use of violent and anti-social behaviour. Based on the qualitative findings of the research, the discussion begins by identifying the trends of behaviour throughout a girl's adolescent years. For ease of understanding, this has been organised by stages of schooling. Then the focus moves beyond peer based fighting, and identifies other persons who get caught up in a girl's violent and anti-social behaviour.

### Trends of behaviour

Research participants were between the ages of 12 to 18. The focus groups and individual interviews involved girls across this age range, while the questionnaire respondents were drawn from Year 9 and 10 and were mainly 13, 14, and 15 years old. The following discussion consists of observations made by the researchers as well as the reflections the girls held about the difference maturity made to their own use of violence and anti-social behaviour and that of their peers. Consideration of the violent and anti-social behaviour trends across girls' adolescent years is very important as it will assist with the most effective placement of prevention strategies, which will in turn lessen the need for future intervention programmes.

### **Before High School**

Discussion with focus groups of girls in their senior years of intermediate school (Years 6, 7 and 8; aged 9 to 13 years old) revealed considerable involvement in relational aggression. The girls spoke of this behaviour and the researchers observed it. Much of this behaviour was based on rivalry between girls about friendship alliances and loyalties, attempts to dominate popularity or attention, defence of a slurred reputation and reaction to disparaging comments. Conflict frequently focused on a girl's appearance, her friends, and her relationships with male peers, and, although less often, the carry-over from conflict involving parents or siblings with another party.

*Like in primary school it's more verbal coz we're scared to like fight but this year (Year 8) it was physical...You get interested in guys and stuff then you start fighting over that and sometimes it just gets overboard and you get like physical fighting. Emily, 12.5, #17*

While technology based aggression did occur, it was limited by the fact that younger girls did not have the same access to mobile phones and the internet as older girls.

Most described their peer based conflicts as taking place either at school or on the way to or from school. Many of these conflicts revolve around relational aggression, which sometimes escalated to physical aggression, verbal fights and the occasional physical fight.

### Dallas's Story

Dallas just moved into the area and she is in Year 7. She is very bright and very articulate. When the girls run into the room for the focus group, Dallas is quick to designate who is to sit in which chair. She sits directly in the middle. The girls she likes sit near her, except for one girl, who did not follow Dallas's instructions. Angie is a keen student so she places her chair close to the researcher, which is in the front of Dallas. When told by Dallas to move, Angie refuses. Dallas turns to the girls' next to her and comments about Angie's 'fat arse' blocking her view. There is a roar of giggles. Dallas shoves the back of Angie's chair, "move it" she says, but Angie remains. As plates of food are being passed around, Dallas grabs the one with the favourite treat before it reaches Angie. "You don't need any of this, fat arse" laughs Dallas, along with her mates. Angie gets up to help herself to another plate of food. Her empty chair is kicked out of the way by Dallas, and another mate grabs it and sits on it. Angie is left without a chair and retreats to a vacant one at the side. Dallas is delighted. Focus group ends and Angie proceeds to the door ahead of Dallas. Dallas clips her across the back of the head with enough force to make her stumble forward and she cries. Dallas beams.

The bravado of a verbal fight included threats of a physical confrontation that sometimes extending to the possibility of involvement of older siblings.

*My sister uses me in every fight she gets into. She's like 'If you give me a hiding my sister's going to give you a hiding'. Gina, 16, #47*

Girls commented there often was lots of threats, lots of posturing but little actual physical fighting. This is not to say physical fighting did not happen, because for some it was a reality.

*I've had some fights then (at intermediate school) but they weren't hard core they were more just like, kinda like a play fight but it wasn't play. Like you'd punch them and stuff but not hard enough to make it hurt or make a bruise or anything. Maybe it would make a bruise a couple of times or you'd slap them or something, kick them, punch them, pinch them but it's not hard enough to be like a real firm hit. Diane, 13, #84*

Girls also identified a considerable level of friction with male peers. Girls' comments ranged from experiencing teasing and name calling to sexual and racial remarks, as well as physical aggression. For some, this provoked verbal fights and furthered physical aggression that could give rise to a physical fight.

### The early years of High School

Retrospectively many girls felt that Years 9 and 10, when girls were mostly aged 13 to 14, were the worst years for girl fighting. Similar to other focus groups, the researchers not only heard descriptions of the girl's interactions but witnessed these behaviours.

*In Year 8, there were a couple of fights, then Year 9 –wow, Year 10 –wow. Girls would say 'you say that again and I will knock your head off.' Some by Year 10 are over it. Focus group comment*

It appeared that not only did alliances and grudges come with girls as they entered high school, but many girls, particularly those from provincial areas, were challenged by the exposure to the greater peer population of a new school that drew students from a number of areas. While the situation provided the opportunity to meet new friends both male and female, girls spoke of the difficulty of doing this as they lacked the confidence to leave the security of an existing peer group and feared the rejection of a potential new one.

### Anne's Story

During a focus group of Year 10 girls who had been 'friends forever' it became obvious not everyone had the same understanding of friendship. These girls were labelled the 'nice ones' by the adults who helped organise the focus group. Four of the eight girls sat tightly together. They dominated the discussion, with Anne, in particular, taking the lead and the remaining girls nodding in agreement with whatever she had to say. The girls had been best mates since primary, Anne said, and they had all decided to go to the same high school. When biscuits were offered to the girls, Anne took hers first, then the other girls followed. When the researchers tried to engage girls who they had not yet heard from in the discussion, Anne spoke for them. When these girls were asked for personal opinion, their eyes met with Anne's before they spoke. When these girls spoke, Anne looked to the girls beside her and they began to giggle. Through a look, a turn of the head, a subtle frown, Anne controlled the demeanour of the group. After the session, one of the adults commented, "aren't they such a nice group of girls."

Girls without existing friend networks, sometimes jumped too quickly into a new peer group and found themselves in situations they did not like or being entangled with the reputation of the group.

*We moved a couple of years ago to (place) and that was hard for me coz then I came here (name of high school) with no friends and I started off getting around with the wrong people and it just went downhill from there I suppose...Trouble with the police, friend problems all the time, bitchiness, school problems...Coz of my drinking I get taken home by the police quite a lot and of course me being in a state I'd abuse them and stuff and it would lead to arresting me... Meg, 14, #81*

Some girls who had been the target of aggressive behaviour at their intermediate school entered high school with trepidation, and tried to keep a low profile to avoid exposing themselves to negative attention. If not successful they tried to manage their exposure by being truant, or spending their out of class time in safe school locations like the guidance building, near the school offices or rooms designated for this purpose.

*The next day I didn't go back to school and I haven't been back to school since, so I pretty much left because of her...I didn't go to school for a few weeks and then I went to (name). Cee, 16, #24*

Other girls brought their existing reputation with them to high school. However, entering a larger school meant that girls who were once big fish in a little pool now had

to try much harder to maintain their presence among a greater population of peers. Having mates video your fight with another girl then put it on the internet, telling a teacher to 'fuck off' in class, or getting expelled for trashing a classroom all went a long way to getting your name known around school, as well as in the community.

*When I came to the school I tried to push myself into a group that I thought I would be comfortable in. Focus group comment*

For others, whether they wanted it or not, they garnered the reputation of their older siblings. Obligated to defend it or dispute it, these girls entered school marked for challenge.

Existing alliances competed for 'top dog' position in a schoolyard, whereby an underlining hierarchical arrangement of popularity and power fostered further divisions between girls. Populars, sluts, nerds, skaters, emos, Maori, smokers, sporty ones, teacher's pets, lesbians, girly girls, stoners are only a few of the divisions that exist in the early years at some high schools.

*There's a few popular, well they think they're popular but they're not. That's the Year 10 girls most of them think they're popular and the girls and that hang out at the tuck shop and then the sort of Nerdy kids hang out by the English block. They sit on the field and then the Year 9's who think they're cool hang out over by the library block on that side and the sporty ones hang out on the field and then it's just me and my mates hang out anywhere. We walk around school and all the smokers used to hang out at the bus bay but it got closed off coz students were smoking drugs. We're the freebies coz we just do our own thing. Carla, 14, #110*

Consequently, those girls who were viewed as outside a group often bore the brunt of relational aggression by falling prey to more socially powerful girls would attempt to publically contrast themselves against those they considered inferior.

*Me and my group that I used to get around with were always the top dogs I suppose you'd say. Always the ones that all the people our age look the other way to and I hated that. We'd still have people that would talk to us and stuff, but most people were scared of us... We weren't gonna back down to anyone. I've got a real heart strong friend called (name) and she's so loyal and everything and she would turn around and be like 'What the fuck are you looking at' at someone. It would be like 'Fuck off, and who are you?' Meg, 14, #81*

The heterosexual competition for male attention or popularity was the main instigator for relational aggression between many girls. Challenged by another girl's looks, popularity or reputation, a girl would attempt to diminish the other's appeal by belittling her. The relational aggression would intensify if the desired outcome was not achieved. As most of the teenage girls of this study owned mobile phones or had access to the internet, technology based aggression often became another way to spread aversion. Such behaviour set girls against girls, divided loyalties and fuelled retaliation where verbal fights occurred and physical fights threatened and sometimes eventuated.

*Year 9's don't think of physically attacking so they go verbal. Focus group comment*

Girls at this level continued to describe friction with male peers in these early years, much of this involved sexual harassment, as described in an earlier section.

*Boys find out things about your personal life and they pick on the girls. The teachers don't do anything. So girls respond back, goes ape then she gets in trouble. Focus group comment*

### **The pivotal year**

Year 11 seemed a pivotal year for many girls, who mainly ranged in age from 14 to 16. Those who settled into that year with the intention of going on to Year 12 and possibly further education had little connection with the violent and anti-social behaviour that led to verbal and physical fights of their earlier years.

*Fighting seems to fade away after Year 11; you don't see the groups as much. Focus group comment*

Relational aggression also appeared to be less for these girls, although the gossip and judgments reared when talk turned to the competition for boys, as did sexual and racial harassment when homophobia and prejudice fuelled conversations.

For other girls, Year 11 was a continuation of the dynamics of the two years past. These girls were well seasoned at relational aggression and many had experience of verbal and physical fights, some more than others. Some display considerable ease relating how they threatened others and bragged of their own confrontations.

Also included here are the girls who became disconnected from school for a number of reasons: (1) they were regularly truant; (2) once old enough they dropped out of the education system; (3) authorities had removed them from a particular school; (4) they were enrolled in alternative education. These were the circumstances for many of the girls we interviewed for this study whose history of relational aggression, verbal and physical fighting went back to their intermediate school days. Interestingly, the research came upon girls who were not enrolled in the school system but periodically returned to their former school to settle unresolved disputes or serve as back up for a peer having issues with a classmate.

The situation with boys appeared to begin to change at this stage and girls did not seem to be receiving the same level of strife from their male peers. Girls who physically fought with boys described the incidents as self-defense, harassment or involvement to aid a boyfriend or female peer caught in their own physical fight.

*He'd call me a ho and stuff and I got angry and told him to 'fuck up' or I'd punch him in the face and he just kept on mouthing off and so yeah, everybody saw but they didn't do anything coz it was with a boy and I just went up to him and punched him in the face. Della, 16, #27*



### **Older girls**

Sixteen to 18 year old girls in their senior years at high school commented that they could not be bothered with the pettiness of girl fighting. For many of them, their lives were busy with plans for further study, school activities, work commitments, or intimate relationships. However, during the interviews and focus groups, it was evident that these girls still engaged in aspects of relational aggression, attesting to their familiarity with this behaviour and its acceptability.

*I just didn't want to hear all the gossip...Just before I left I was really well known to the popular group and they were saying come like hang out with me and stuff and most of them were my friends as well, like they were in my class but I was just like 'Yeah, nah, I really can't be bothered'. Lori 16, #49*

Girls aged 16 and 18 who were outside the education system spoke about on-going involvement in relational aggression that frequently led to verbal fights with threats of physical violence, and occasional physical fights with female peers. When these girls spoke of physical fights with males, they were referring to involvement in intimate partner violence or involvement to aid a boyfriend or female peer.

### **Final thought**

During numerous interviews with girls aged 13, 14, and 15, admiration was expressed for the fighting prowess of girls or female relatives in their later teens. These older peers were held up as examples of confident, powerful leaders. It is a concern that these young women were role models to adolescent girls. Adding to this concern, several girls who had ongoing involvement in physical fighting spoke of their efforts to 'toughen up' younger sisters to be able to handle themselves at school. Considering that young people tend to follow the examples set by their older peers, it is disconcerting that the issues of violence and anti-social behaviour being addressed in this report may soon need to be studied among a young age group.

### **Kelli's Story**

Kelli is 15, she is known as a 'top dog' at school. During the focus group, she has lots to share. She is not the oldest child in the family, but she is the toughest and has taken responsibility for Silvi, her twelve-year old sister. As she tells it, "I smash my little sister so when she is older if someone smashes her, she would say 'so what was that' (shrugs shoulders) because she is used to getting a hiding from me." Her goal is to toughen Silvi up. Kelli explains how she is going about training her young sister: "When Silvi was real young I started off real soft as I was punching her, she would say that did not hurt so I would step it up a notch and punch her harder." Silvi is also being taught how to respond, so "she can stand up for herself and if someone picks on her and gives her a hiding she does not come running to me all the time." But actually, Kelli does not think it is right for younger 7 and 8 year olds to fight and she hopes that they will look up to older girls fighting.

### **Others caught up in girls' violence**

Earlier in this report it was identified that the main recipients of girls' violent and anti-social behaviour were other female peers and, to a lesser extent, male peers. This discussion now broadens to include others who, at times, are caught up in this



behaviour. Focus is given to violence involving siblings, parents, and other adults both within the household and those outside of it. This information is drawn from the interviews and focus groups where girls spoke about their role as perpetrators and as recipients of this behaviour. Where available, quantitative findings from the questionnaires shed light on gender differences for comparison. This information contributes to our understanding that girls' violence can be more than a schoolyard issue and, in recognising this, increases our understanding that prevention and intervention must take a holistic approach that encompasses all the people that a girl interacts with in her world.

### **Siblings**

Violence between siblings is a controversial topic because of the difficulty of distinguishing what is sibling rivalry and what is sibling assault. Eriksen and Jensen (2009), referring to the work of Caffaro and Conn-Caffaro, state sibling assault "involves repeated patterns of physical aggression with the intent to harm, humiliate, and defeat" and is part of an "escalating pattern of sibling aggression and retaliation" (p. 185). The research was most interested in the severe behaviour and its association with girls' violence and anti-social behaviour.

The information in the section below displays results from the project's questionnaires and offers insight into the physical altercation occurring between same gender and cross gender siblings of Year 9 and 10 students. It indicates that boys are reported to engage in hitting siblings of both genders more than girls, who appear to assault their sisters more. While this data shows levels of activity, it does not however indicate the intensity of this behaviour. There is the possibility that because there was physical interaction being received as well as given out, that the situations involved defensive actions or retaliation. However from the quantitative data it is also not possible to determine instigation or assign responsibility. It is the qualitative data from the interviews that illuminates the circumstances surrounding some episodes of sibling assault.

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### **Sibling violence - brother**

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated they had a male sibling and that brother had, sometimes or often, hit them in the past year or they had hit their brother.

- Of the 1294 girls who reported that they had a brother, 39.1% indicated that they hit their brother.
- Of these 1294 girls, 48.0% reported being hit by their brother.
- Of the 1273 boys who reported that they had a brother, 42.4% indicated that they hit their brother.
- Of these 1273 boys, 46.9% reported being hit by their brother.

### Sibling violence - sister

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated they had a female sibling and that sister had, sometimes or often, hit them in the past year or they had hit their sister.

- Of the 1220 girls who reported that they had a sister, 33.9% indicated that they hit their sister.
- Of these 1220 girls, 42.6% reported being hit by their sister.
- Of the 1259 boys who reported that they had a sister, 21.1% indicated that they hit their sister.
- Of these 1259 boys, 34.6% reported being hit by their sister.

Many girls spoke about physical fights with siblings that were based upon rivalry over possessions, household chore responsibility or disclosures made to parents. But some girls shared their experiences of verbal fights becoming physical and resulting in serious physical and emotional injury. These fights were used to address conflict between sisters and often matched the intensity of their altercations with girls outside the family. Yet girls joked that fighting with a sister was acceptable, because “she is your sister, and she will always be.” Such a paradoxical statement becomes a justification for family violence. Until siblings altercations are acknowledged as violent behaviour, some girls, and boys, will continue to hone their fighting skills on other members of the household.

*Got six sisters and fight with them all until Mom says to stop. It’s different at home fighting, you don’t want to kill them just given them a hiding so they learn.*  
Focus group comment

*Once or twice I’ve made her bleed on the face. Sarah, 16, #83*

While some sisters gave and received hidings from each other, hidings were much less common between brothers and sisters. Physical fights with brothers were viewed more commonly as play or affectionate interaction and the girls rarely mentioned that these moments escalated to the intensity of the fights they had with their sisters. There were exceptions when play gave way to severe altercations

*Me and my brother were always fighting like I punched him in the nose one day, gave him two black eyes, just about broke his nose. Dani, 16, #59*

*The fighting I do involves me and my brothers, mostly play fighting but sometimes one of them goes nuts. Female, 15, Questionnaire comment*

### Parents

Adolescent violence towards parents is not a new issue but one that has not received much formal attention in New Zealand (Crichton-Hill, Evans & Meadows, 2006). The

level of adolescent violence towards parents displayed in our quantitative findings outlined in the section below was less than 10%, while approximately 16% of parents hit their children. Again it must be mentioned that because there was physical interaction by both parties, there is the possibility that the situations involved defensive actions or retaliation, however it is not possible to assign instigation or responsibility from the quantitative data. More in-depth understanding of parent related altercations is included in the qualitative findings.

Girls' use of violence towards parents showed little difference whether it was directed at the mother (8.4%) or the father (7.4%). Whereas boys were more inclined to hit their fathers (8.7%) than their mothers (5.3%).

### **Violence and mother or female guardian**

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated that in the last year they had hit their mother or female guardian sometimes or often, or their mother or female guardian had hit them.

- Of the 1704 girls surveyed, 8.4% indicated that they hit their mother or female guardian
- Of the 1704 girls surveyed, 17.7% report that their mother or female guardian hits them
- Of the 1720 boys surveyed, 5.3% indicated that they hit their mother or female guardian
- Of the 1720 boys surveyed, 14.8% indicated that their mother or female guardian hits them

### **Violence and father or male guardian**

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated that in the last year they had hit their father or male guardian sometimes or often, or their father or male guardian had hit them.

- Of the 1704 girls surveyed, 7.4% indicated that they hit their father or male guardian
- Of the 1704 girls surveyed, 15.3% report that their father or male guardian hits them
- Of the 1720 boys surveyed, 8.7% indicated that they hit their father or male guardian
- Of the 1720 boys surveyed, 15.9% indicated that their father or male guardian hits them

Almost all girls mentioned times when they had argued with their mothers, but when asked, most said they would never hit her, even those girls who engaged in physical fighting with girls or sisters. For them, their mother held a special place in the family that required respect and for some this justified their mothers' use of corporal punishment of a smack.

*A hit is different to a smack. I have been smacked. If I'm a bad arse then mum will beat my ass, cos I deserve it. Female, 15, Questionnaire comment*

Other girls minded their behaviour towards their mothers out of respect as well as out of fear of receiving a hiding.

*We get along all right. Sometimes we get in each other faces though. Like I respect my Mum though, kids in my class call their Mum's sluts and that I'm like you guys disrespect your Mum's. If I called my Mum a slut I'd get a real hiding. Carla, 14, #110*

#### **Enya's Story**

Enya is 15 and she said she had never hit her mother but she had tried to. Of all her siblings, she is the only one that ever talked back to their mother. "And I only done that last week, I was so proud of myself." It all began when Enya threw a cup to her sister to take back into the kitchen. "She was like, 'No you fucken slut just do it yourself', and I was like 'Fuck you, you cunt' and she came upstairs and chucked it back at me. I was like you 'fucken fat pig' and I like chucked it back at her and she gave me a hiding". The hiding consisted of punches to the head that resulted in bruises. Enya's mother called her to come back down stairs, but Enya refused. Her mother kept insisting that she come down to do a chore. After a time, Enya went downstairs and outside to her mother. "My Mum was about to give me a hiding with the stick and I was like 'Mum you never listen to my side of the story and she was just 'No just hurry the fuck up and do it (the chore)' and I was like 'No Mum, not until you listen to me' and she was like 'Well hurry up then'." Enya went on to explain her involvement in the fight with her sister. Towards the end of her explanation she grabbed the stick from her mother's hand and threw it away. Enya was happy the way the situation ended. "I was like 'Mum can I have a smoke' and she was like 'Yeah.'"

*I've nearly hit her but I'd never hit my Mum. She's my Mum. Nat, 16, #62*

For others girls, their mother held no special status in their lives and they responded to their mothers as they did their female peers. This was especially so if their mother hit them first, then they felt justified to retaliate.

*Mum would like kind of push my buttons and I like hit her or push her and then she'd like hit me back...I wasn't really bought up with my Mum, that's why I can do that, yell at her and hit her and stuff. Della, 16, #27*

*I was in a foul mood and she slapped me first. Kinda 'just don't be so disrespectful to me' really. So I was just like 'Whatever bitch' and slapped her back. Meg, 14, #81*

*Fight with mom because she's a bitch, she hits me first then I hit her back. Can't let your mama hit you like that. Focus group comment*

Interestingly, while girls retaliated with physical aggression, they also reverted to the familiar peer territory of relational aggression to verbally attack their mothers.

*When I'm angry I punch my mum and dis her weight. Female, 13, Questionnaire comment*

As in Nikki's story below, some girls described their childhood years as filled with violent and abusive behaviour from parents. As some tell it, once they got a bit older, they found their own way out of the family situation and sometimes this involved physical retaliation.

#### **Nikki's Story**

For Nikki, physical violence with her mother has been intensifying over the years. When she was nine she got disciplined with a wooden spoon but they started snapping everything so plastic spatulas were used until they started breaking. So Nikki's mother resorted to forcing her spoonfuls of curry powder. First she would dampen the powder so it would stick to the sides of Nikki's mouth. Finally when the anti-smacking campaign came out, Nikki warned her mother that she would go to the police if things did not change. Without physical discipline Nikki's mother could not handle her and sent her to live with Nikki's father. That lasted until there was a new woman in Dad's life and Nikki was sent back. This pattern continued every few months for four years. Each time meant a new school. Finally Nikki moved in with a boyfriend. She recently got into a fight with her mother and when her mother hit her Nikki hit back. Nikki has been in trouble for assault, has several trespass orders against her and lives with an abusive boyfriend. She wants to bring out her own makeup brand and be a professional hairdresser and a beautician, but first she has got to finish Year 11.

Except for the girls who openly declared their respect for their mothers, when girls described physical altercations with females in the household, there was a sense of parity between the opponents' power, both in stature and status. Yet when girls described physical fighting with birth fathers, there was an awareness of the difference in power. For some girls this had a major influence on their response, while others were not scared off and tried even harder.

*The only person I'm scared of is my Dad. Coz he can bash, like really, really bashes me, and I have to listen to him. You know that if he hits you, you can tell people about that. Yeah, but I don't coz I love my Dad and I don't want him to go to jail. I still love my Dad even though he hits me. Della, 16, #27*

*Dad (a retired athlete) was trying to drag me to the cop station but he just sort of had me on the ground like leaning on me and just like losing it...If we've been in a fight, like, I'll smack or whatever, like kick him or whatever. Sarah 16, #83*

Other girls described how domestic violence in the household drew them into a direct altercation with their father.

*They (parents) were fighting, Dad was real drunk and I put my hand through a mirror to shut them up, and then I hit him in the eye...And then he, I had a scarf around my neck and he pulled the scarf tight around my neck...He was done for assault. Mere, 16, #19*

### **Other adults**

In this discussion other adults refers to people who are not parents or guardians. For example, this could include members of the extended family, people in authority, friends of family members and education staff. The quantitative data in the following section indicates that boys experience physical altercations with adults who are not a parent or guardian more than girls do. Again it must be mentioned that because there was physical interaction by both parties, there is the possibility that the situations involved defensive actions or retaliation, however it is not possible to assign instigation or responsibility from the quantitative data results.

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### **Violence and an adult other than parent or guardian**

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated an adult other than a parent or guardian had, sometimes or often, hit them in the past year or they had hit this adult.

- Of the 1704 girls surveyed, 4.7% indicated that they hit an adult, other than a parent or guardian hits them
  - Of the 1704 girls surveyed, 8.8% report that an adult, other than a parent or guardian hits them
  - Of the 1720 boys surveyed, 7.8% indicated that they hit an adult, other than a parent or guardian hits them
  - Of the 1720 boys surveyed, 11.7% indicated that an adult, other than a parent or guardian hits them
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Occasionally, girls spoke of physical altercations with their grandparents who tried to intervene in a girl's fight with her parents or when they tried to step into a parenting role.

*They (grandparents) use to try and hit us so we'd try and defend ourselves and stuff. Britney, 14, #38*

The issue of girls' violence toward their grandparents is a growing area of concern as it is common for girls having difficulty at home to spend time in the care of older relatives. Consideration needs to be given to the possibility of violence occurring in this situation, particularly if girls have a history of violence towards parents and also if members of an older generation rely on parenting practices that involve corporal punishment.

During the interviews and focus groups, girls spoke of physical altercations with men in their mothers' lives, such as boyfriends or new partners. Rarely did girls assign these men with the same recognition of power as they did for their father. Some of the girls interviewed for this project, spoke of being both verbally and physically aggressive to this new man. Some were jealous over the loss of their mother's attention and others miffed by their mother's replacement for their father, while some were aggressive for their own safety and that of their other siblings.

*He came into the room and he's like, Sue, get up and bloody look after (younger sibling)...And he slapped me around the head...I picked it (a cup) up and just chucked it at him...That day was the most scariest day of my life, I just couldn't believe he hit me...He's not my Dad so why is he hitting me? Sue, 16, #43*

In a similar way, a 14-year old girl presented a variation of sibling violence. She commented that she was hit often by her older sister's boyfriend. This presented a difficult family situation whereby the girl may have had to comprise her responses to avoid alienating her sister. As an extension of family violence, this is an area worthy of further investigation.

Other adults who have as much, and sometimes more, contact with girls than their family, is their school teachers. The discussion of violence against teachers is very topical and an important consideration for the profession. Many of the girls interviewed had little good to say about their school experience. Consequently, these girls subjected their teachers to direct and indirect aggression. Some girls admitted that the purpose of their verbal fight with a teacher was to try to win it by reducing a teacher to tears or having them walk away.

*I told the teacher to shut up because she was yelling at me and I was like 'Shut up, I hate you.' I loved it...They win no matter how hard you try to win in the argument they still win, but I know that I've hurt them a bit. Something that I could say still hurts them. If they stopped arguing with you and they go get a yellow sheet you haven't won. Yeah you lose, game over. But if they stop and just have a blank and don't even have anything to say and then goes off, carries on with something else then you've won. But then you say 'Shame' which makes it like 'I won', which makes it worse again. Sammie, 14, #53*

Occasionally things turned nasty and girls retaliated with acts of physical aggression.

*Once kicked out for like fucking up a teacher's car. Just hard out keyed it out and just like stabbed the tyre...I just used to get real pissed off with her and I like threw stones and shit at her house. Sarah, 16, # 83*

One girl told how she got her revenge on a teacher by inciting her father to visit the school. Well aware that her father had a temper, the incident ended up with the teacher in hospital and the father in custody.

Sometimes girls' personal lives spilled into the classroom and teachers were unfortunately the target for misplaced anger, as in Gina's story.

#### **Gina's story**

When Gina was 8 years old, another student called her fat so she picked up a chair and smacked her on the head. That is what she remembers about the first time she was violent. She is now 16 and has more assault charges than her age. She learned at the young age of three that if she was angry at her mother, all she had to do was wind up the boyfriend at the time and he would lose his temper and take it out on her mother, and Gina got her revenge. In her words: "I wasn't really close to my Mum, I didn't really give a shit." When she got a bit older, Gina would run away from her foster parents and return to her mother's. Each time she returned home, there would be a new boyfriend. Older and wiser, she now had more of an awareness of her mother's abusive relationships and tried to come to her aid. "I would get a hiding probably twice a day from my Mum's partners for standing up for my Mum...I've been unconscious twice from my Mum's partners in the past." At fifteen, Gina started living with a young man, it was an abusive relationship: "He kicks me, he drags me on the ground, he punches the living fuck out of me, he strangled me, he's put me in hospital." To her credit, Gina remained in the education system. Then one day in class "I literally nearly killed a teacher. My boyfriend was texting me, abusing the shit out of me on my phone at school, right, and I got real angry and the teacher's like 'Gina put your phone away rararara' and I was like 'Nah I'm trying to see why my boyfriend's having a big nut at me' sort of thing." Unbeknownst to the teacher, she was Gina's last straw. "And then (teacher) literally snatch my phone off me and I broke my phone and I stood up and she backed off and I threw a chair at her and then she ended up falling on the ground and I ended up beating the living shits out of her head". Gina is back learning again, education is really important to her. She wants to get NCEA level 3, do a nannying course, then a cooking course and then Gina says "I just want to travel the world." Gina, 16, #47

Other times teachers tried to intervene and got caught in the cross fire.

*I got kicked out for a fight, yeah and like a teacher tried stopping me and I thought it was another kid and I smacked her and broke her nose and I was like whoops. Kina, 13, #36*

Police officers sometimes caught the aggression of girls who were highly emotive, drunk or stoned. Viewed in a similar way to teachers, few girls respected them. Almost every girl who encountered a police officer felt she was being hard done by.

*The first time I got arrested was for verbal abuse against a police officer...I was quite drunk...Everyone wanted to throw a swear word in...And the pigs saying 'next person who swears is going to be arrested...I's like what and threw my two cents in. Geri, 17, #25*



*I've tried to hit police. I would be drunk and just I'd be like 'Fuck you, you can't take me nowhere'. Meg, 14, #81*

*Once I've got a hiding from a police before. Yeah, like coz I was swearing and that's all I was doing I wasn't like hitting him or doing anything and he just grabbed me by the throat and he's like 'you better fuck up' and like going like that to me. And I was like, he was literally choking me and I was like 'what the hell'. Della, 16, #27*

There were girls who had praise for the police, but this usually referred to encounters that were outside the call of duty, where they acknowledge the support and kindness they were given.

Finally, other people who got caught up in girls' violence were people who were trying to do what they thought was the right thing at the time. In the two situations below, the girls involved were highly emotive and not all parties were fully informed, consequently the adults were physically assaulted.

*Mom threw a knife at my little brother. So he and my little sister ran away. But the neighbour brought them back so my sister (16) hit the neighbour for getting involved. Focus group comment*

*I actually don't know what was going on I'd just got to town... One of my mates was talking to one of these girls and this lady, she's like 'Hey leave them alone' and then my friend was like 'Shut up' and then she just like 'Just leave now before I call the cops' and we were like 'Call the cops' and we just walked off. And then the lady like grabbed my friend by her arm and my friend tried to pull her arm out but the lady wouldn't let her go so I walked up to the lady and I ripped her apart and then she grabbed my arm and she wouldn't let me go so I like swung at her to so she would let me go...Like she told that I grabbed her and that I punched her twice but everyone that was there even saw that she grabbed me and she wouldn't let me go and I only punched her once...My side of the story is self-defence. Ressa, 14, #73*

### **Final thought**

A girl never engages in physical fighting in isolation. She never wakes up one day and decides to be a fighter. Like the stories above, a girl is groomed for a life of violence from a very young age by the circumstances of her personal life and world around her. The more familiar she becomes with physical violence the more it permeates her life. As a result, she can choose to draw upon it to defend herself or to communicate her message in any challenge that she is presented with, whether it be an argument with her teacher or a street fight with a peer. Any intervention that she undergoes will need to unravel that which has always made sense to her.

## WHY GIRLS ARE VIOLENT AND ANTI-SOCIAL

Acts of violence and anti-social behaviour do not happen without a purpose. While they may appear random and pointless at times, there is always a reason the perpetrator chooses this course of action; the violence serves a function for them.

While it may seem an odd point of reference, this discussion has benefitted from Beneduce, Jourdan, Raeymaeker and Vlassenroot's (2006) analysis of the participation of children and young people in the civil conflict of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Although a far cry from New Zealand, parallels can be drawn between the youth in this African nation who took to military arms and the girl in this research who grounded another girl with two short, sharp punches to the head. Such images push us to think beyond the expected norms of behaviour we hold for age and gender. Both the situations described above came about because the lives of these children were chaotic and insecure. For them, at that time, violence made sense in their world of turmoil. For some New Zealand youth the plight of disempowerment caused by the breakdown of family or culture, the lack of employment or education opportunities, or the daily challenge of poverty, violence or prejudice matches or may even surpass the relative turmoil of a civil conflict.

To combat these problems in the respective countries, a number of 'peace processes' or intervention programmes have hastily been put in place. What Beneduce et al (2006) point out, which is relevant in New Zealand, is that such an effort creates 'islands of stability' particularly in the urban centres where funding is more readily available. As a consequence, the situation of rural localities is frequently overlooked. Considering the quantitative findings of this research project, which identified equal or greater levels of violent and anti-social behaviour in the provincial locations, this is a concern. Urbanisation along with the frequent relocation by individuals throughout the country means that any 'islands of stability' that exist are constantly being re-contaminated. This is particularly evident in the practice of relocating a 'problem' girl to relatives in a different part of the country or to a school in another community. As schools so often observe, girls bring their behaviours with them and it is not long before old issues surface disturbing the stability of her new location.

The phenomena of girls' violence, like that of children's military action, has proven to be perplexing and has left many working with these young people grappling for understanding of how to proceed. As Beneduce et al (2006) highlight, so often agency for change is based on outside knowledge and fails to comprehend at a grassroots level the function violence holds for the individual perpetrators. For intervention or prevention strategies to be successful they must consider how to transform a perpetrator's motivation; thus remove the purpose for their violence.

The following discussion attempts to unravel the attraction violence and anti-social behaviour hold for some girls. It is based on the premise that violence offers these girls strategies to affirm their personal interests. The discussion begins by examining violence as a strategy for defence, then how violence is central to identity, followed by violence viewed as part of a fair and just process and concludes with violence as a means for social mobility.

### Violence as a strategy for defence

Girls frequently reported that they turned to violence as a means to defend themselves from both physical harm and emotional injury. When words failed to fend off an attack, a girl would move to her fists. Sometimes she did not bother with an attempt at retaliation through words and went straight into a swing. The result was a quick fix, which suited a girl with minimal tolerance or whose patience had dwindled because of other stresses in her life.

*She just got up in my face and starting nutting off at me, like whenever someone does that to me, my first reaction is just to hit them so I just (noise indicating hitting) slapped her. I'm not the kind of person who is gonna get into major scraps. I'm like, if you annoy me, I just push you away. Oh there were other situations where this girl threw a chair at me and I just got up in her face and smacked her on the nose. Olli, 15, #35*

Girls nearly always defended themselves against physical aggression with physical assault, and in many cases this same response is given when verbal attacks crossed over a girl's comfort zone and transcended her personal and emotional space.

*The girl turned around and said 'You need to stop eating McDonalds, you fat little bitch' and I'm just like 'what' and then she came up to smack me on the face and I just turned around and went 'Nah' and I laid into her. Kina, 13, #36*

Similarly, girls used physical violence to retain personal integrity especially when someone directly or indirectly tried to shame or blame them. So often it was mentioned that emotional challenges cut much deeper than a fist would ever do.

*She blamed it on me to her Dad and then her Dad came around to my house when I was by myself and started yelling at me. Then the next Monday she was at school telling everyone that I caused it all so I shoved her head into a pole. Tasha, 14, #18*

Girls reported defending themselves against potential threats in an effort to preserve the status quo. Confronted with an imminent challenge or even a speculative one, a girl will fight to retain her control. This is especially so when constants in her life are few; those that exist are highly valued. A prime example is the territoriality a girl displays when other females advance on her romantic interest. With this in mind, it is no wonder that many girls fight over the 'theft' of a boyfriend or the pursuit of another's partner.

*I got into a fight with a girl. She was just being really, really skanky. She didn't notice I was in the car and she was like 'Hey (boy's name), I'll get my tits out for you' and I just went nuts. Stevi, 16, #32*

*I fight with girls if they touch my boyfriend. And if they even looked at him. And if they called me ugly or emo or whatever they get a punch, a few in the face. And if anybody invades on what I'm doing, they get a punch in the face. And if the boys want to pick a scrap with my boyfriend they can scrap with me first. Jude, 13, #29*

In some cases her need to preserve stability in her life extended beyond a girl's personal realm to encompass her surrounding environment.

*I ended up stepping in there and shoving him around then his Mrs was having to pull him away. Coz I was like ' Nah, you don't come to our home town and start causing shit like this. Emma, 18, #68*

Not only does a girl fight to keep herself safe and secure, but she earnestly defends those she views as an extension of herself. To attack or belittle a person that the girl considers to be part of her family, whether by blood or close affiliation is as if to inflict a personal assault upon the girl. The family member(s) may not necessarily be present in her life now or return the same depth of feeling, but for the girl they represent a connection and through this connection comes a sense of belonging; she is not alone in her chaotic world. Her deep affinity might be based on memories of times before, or a deep seeded belief that family comes first no matter what. When in their company, she acknowledges their connection by offering her assistance to fight alongside them or even to be their substitute in a brawl. If they are not present at the time, she will fight to protect their honour. To an outsider, it seems paradoxical that a girl puts herself at risk of physical harm and legal implications to defend the honour of a family member who played a part in her own neglectful upbringing. Or when a girl retaliates with punches against those who insult her parents, the same parents she disrespected with disparaging comments the night before.

*Of course no one talks shit about my family. They're your family so of course you are going to stop them being hurt. Focus group comment*

*She started talking about my Mum and how she is such a slut and how my sisters are gonna grow up to be a slut and how my Mum's a crack whore and my Dad's a known man whore so we were like 'Nah fuck this'. It took about six shots, six hits to the face to get her to drop and when she was down...Just beat the shit out of her. Jude, 13, #29*

*I was with my (relative) and she was pregnant and she's a bit of a fighter...I was rolling with her one night and me and her were pretty drunk, we walked through town beating everyone up...She's quite a big girl and someone else's hit to her isn't much to her. She didn't get hit in the stomach but she got hit in the face and I just nudded, I couldn't see my (relative) being pregnant getting hit. Bee, 15, #44*

Girls described a similar depth of affinity with their close female friends. For many girls their friends became a pseudo family and served to replace a negligible familial bond or extend a girl's sense of connection. As mentioned before, connection brought with it a sense of belonging and a feeling of security. Defended like family, girls fought to protect their close friends from physical threat or verbal abuse. In doing so, they honoured the friendship. In an interesting twist, girls described the fluidity of friendship networks and how girls often became friends with the girls they had fought against within a few weeks time. Such a practice makes it incredibly complicated for individuals outside girl networks to decipher allegiances and avoid making erroneous conclusions about their associations.

*I'd jump in in a heartbeat for her coz she's my best friend so I wouldn't let anything happen to her. Emma, 18, #68*

*Yeah just triggers me everything if they go on about my Mum, my dad, my sisters or anybody in my family or one of my best friends or me that just triggers me to hit them and I just hit them. Ally, 14, #66*

*I don't fight for anyone else. Unless they hurt my family or my friends. Carla, 14, #110*

In defending others, a girl does not consider herself alone, for her actions are done to support the people who matter in her world. How can she not defend them? They might be all that she has, knows or cares about.

In contrast girls rarely spoke about using violence to defend their male intimate partners in the same way as they did their family or female friends. There was not similar emphasis given to loyalty or regard. It was rare for girls to describe needing to defend against verbal abuse being directed at the characteristics of their boyfriends. When their boyfriends were mentioned in an affront the focus tended to be on the girl's shortcomings in the relationship, such as 'Why would he go out with a dog like you?' Her response was then to defend herself either verbally or with physical retaliation. Only a few girls spoke of stepping into a physical fight to defend their male partner. When they did, it was to divert the course of action so their partner avoided serious harm or consequences, although they may be putting themselves at risk.

*He had (male) on the ground, so she just grabbed a bottle and just wacked him on the head. Geri, 17, #25*

*I'm the one who gets in the least trouble and I know being boys it tends to get a bit out of hand. Coz there has been a couple of very violent fights between guys that I know that have just ended up in blood baths so it's easier if I step I there. Emma, 18, #68*

By viewing violence as a necessary strategy for defence, girls dilute their individual responsibility. In linking violence with defence, girls rationalized and ritualized their use of violent behaviour as a normal and a natural part of their world. Therefore in their judgment, violence for the purpose of defence is a morally acceptable action; it is after all done for protection. As the quotes below illustrate fighting to defend is "the right time to fight" and "it is just like a natural thing". The key to successful intervention for these girls lies in giving them other tools for defence that do not involve physical violence.

*The right time to fight would be when there is someone just picking on your family or insulting your family or just hitting you or insulting you and you don't know how to deal with it and you just have to think real fast just to make it stop and you just hit them and yeah you can't say anything coz you are too angry to even say anything coz you'll be yelling and yelling and yelling and then you just hit them. Ally, 14, #66*

*I don't want them standing up, I just grab them by the hair and pull them down and kick them...Just got used to it, didn't see anything wrong with it, coz grew up with it....It is just like a natural thing...But sometimes you got to do what you got to do. Pip, 18, #26*

While their actions may involve others or occur because of their relationships with others, girls' use of violence, as described above, was a consequence of their need to fend for themselves and their self interests.

#### **Patsy's Story**

Patsy's younger sister Shannon came home from school feeling really sad. She said that a girl had called her a slut and given her a hiding. Patsy wanted to do something about this; she hated seeing her sister so upset. Patsy and a mate approached the girl and asked her to apologise to Shannon. The request was met with 'I'm not doing anything your sister can just stop having her little cries and shit'. Patsy was not happy with this result. A few days later she crossed paths with the girl. Again Patsy politely asked her to stop picking on her sister and again her request was met with a blunt refusal. Patsy turned to harder words and a verbal battle ensued. Finally Patsy's mates started yelling 'Just hit her, just hit her' and eventually Patsy did. "I couldn't stop punching her coz I was so angry...They pulled me off...I kept going back. I was so angry, I keep shaking." Her friends dragged her away from the girl who lay beaten in the street. "I was like 'Oh my God what did I do, what if I get into trouble for this.'" Her friends assured her she would be fine. The police quickly turned up and read her rights and put her in the car. At the station she was searched, pictures taken and they put her in the cells for a few hours. Patsy got into serious trouble. This was not the first time Patsy physically defended her family. Yet in many other ways she is just like many other girls her age and with dreams of becoming a famous fashion model.

#### Violence as central to social identity

A girl's social identity is constructed from her recognizable characteristics that either set her apart from peers or bring her into unity with them. By being distinct she risks becoming ostracized for her differences and potentially could become a target for negative attention. In contrast, her individuality may lead her to be revered by her peers who appreciate her points of difference. When a girl shares similarity with her peers, she benefits from a collective identity and so minimises the risk of being harassed for her differences. However to maintain her membership in a group, she must stay in favour with her peers and conform to their behaviours and interests, thus placing her at risk of being 'tarred with the same brush'. The following discussion illustrates that for many girls involved in this study, violence was key to their social identity as it provided them with a means to establish, maintain or redefine it.

The more comfortable a girl was with her identity as a tough girl or a fighter, the more she validated her actions by emphasising her qualities of self-reliance and self-confidence. With pride she would acknowledge that this was who she was; an independent young woman who could take care of herself.

*I don't let nobody push me around. Emma, 18, #68*

This self-validation extended to her unyielding determination to always stand her ground. Her conviction was unfaltering, even when faced with a negative outcome. In her eyes it was better to take a hiding than to back down; better to hold the standard you set for yourself no matter what happens.

*Sometimes I win and sometimes I lose, but if I do lose I still keep my head up high.*  
Kina, 13, #36

*I don't care that I could get a hiding, at least I tried.* Carla, 14, #110

Tough girls spoke of how a character of conviction is built through repeated challenges, with the emphasis placed on learning from your mistakes or shortcomings.

*Yeah if you don't stand your ground everyone will just start thinking you are weak so they can just stand over you...Stand your ground and if you take a hiding it is just the same thing as getting toughened up by somebody, it will encourage you to like make yourself tougher. Try encourage yourself to be stronger, hit back, do what you can, learn how to fight.* Ally, 14, #66

*My sister, if I need a hiding she'll give it to me. Do you cry? Nah, get another hiding. It was like if I got a smack and I cried, you'd get another one.* Sammie, 14, #53

They rose to the challenge of a physical fight. They were not 'keyboard warriors' but, as young Kina below implies, they were real people who fought their battles face to face.

*I'll bully people face to face, not over the net. I think that if it's over the net or texting or any type of bullying over the web, like cyber bullying is cowardly so I'd much rather do it face to face. I have had it done to me once and I was just like seriously made me think this is pretty stupid, you doing it over the net instead of face to face, if you were a real person, you'd do it face to face.* Kina, 13, #36

These girls gave all of themselves to their fights and there were no half-hearted efforts. They had to, as this was their means of self-validation. Comments are often heard about the fervour of girl fighting; that they do not stop, that their attack is relentless and their aggression brutal. Passion drives these fights because their belief in themselves is at stake. As a winner or as a loser, they must validate and honour themselves. The pieces fall into place when it is appreciated that many of these girls don't have a lot of external validation or approval coming their way.

Standing true to your convictions, learning from your mistakes, getting back up and giving it another go, motivate yourself to improve; these are words often said by heroes and leaders, yet they are quoted above as the words of girls who are fighters. These girls demonstrate that they have qualities, that they have potential, if only their circumstances were different. Yet somehow in their short journey of life they have gotten on a different track where their outcomes will most likely be limited. The challenge of working with these girls is finding a replacement for their violence that will make them feel as confident and in control of their lives. But even more necessary will be efforts to prevent them going down that track in the first place.



Reputation fosters a girl's social identity. A reputation could be based on the girl herself or it could be enmeshed in her relationships to others. For a reputation to serve her interests, it must be known to others. Girls in the study described how violence was central to their reputation, it got them noticed and it got them remembered.

*There is a lot of people that know I'm a fighter, there is a lot of people that when they see me they back away from me. Gina, 16, #47*

*I get told that a lot of people are scared of me and they don't even know me. Half the time coz I've got a lot of friends...I just do it to show off and stuff...I'd get real angry and like 'What the fuck did you say to me bitch', 'Come say it to my face again' and if she didn't I'd just start getting real angry like. Then my friend would be to them 'Shut up, shut up and get lost or (Carla's) going to get real angry' and if they kept going I'd just get into a fight. Carla, 14, #110*

*People say they're like scared of us...Like some of them are intimidated by us but we're not even that bad so unless they're like being a dick to us, I don't care. Jo, 15, #33*

A reputation as a fighter also served as a protection strategy that would repel potential challenges before they eventuated. This not only reduced the threat of injury or risk of losing but perpetuated the supremacy of the girl holding the reputation.

*People look at me, and the people I associate with, and they just wouldn't come at me. Lareen, 14, #21*

*There is this big thing in (place) that who ever is the strongest you don't mess with them and they just go around smashing girls. (Girl's name) she's got this attitude where it's don't mess with me, she's got a few good mates that keep by her side but they're just there for protection. Mere, 16, #19*

Once a reputation is established, it needed to be maintained to be effective. For these girls, this meant that they could not back down from a challenge. If they did, the consequences would be devastating to their social identity.

*To back down from a fight is like saying 'Nah fuck you, I'm a pussy'. Jude, 13, #29*

*Girls get pressured into fights. You're a pussy if you don't fight, your reputation goes down the drain if you don't fight. Focus group comment*

If her actions reflected on the reputation of others, then the significance was amplified. Letting down her group would put her at risk of being ostracized and her social identity would be diminished.

*Us girls at school known as top dog, no one wants to step up to us, no one will get smart to us. I told my cousin if she does not smash (name) she lets our reputation go down. She said no, not with all the people around, I said 'who cares about the people around, show them all that you are top dog too'. If she did not fight? I'd punch her in the head. She kills my day. Focus group comment*



Wanting to maintain their reputation as a tough girl or as a fighter was a pivotal reason many girls fought. Those who were confident in their ability to succeed entered an altercation knowing that the outcome would be advantageous to their reputation as a fighter, hence distinguishing their social identity. Those silently less confident still endeavoured to be true to their reputation knowing a good show of effort would mar their social identity less than no attempt at all.

*Why wouldn't you walk away? Coz then your mates would call you 'D' nuts, Drop nuts, and you don't want that to be your nickname all the time. What would others think? Oh she's not a tough girl, she's just weak. Enya, 15, #45*

*If they're in a group and they're like 'Just deck her and stuff', you sort of have to show everyone else that you're not like drop nuts...Like you'd back down sort of. Sarah, 16, #83*

Dropping, backing down or showing weakness in a fight resulted in a dire outcome. To not maintain your honour as a fighter or to show others that you had 'no balls' was to distinguish yourself as a lesser person. It was an ultimate shame of self-betrayal in the eyes of girls who prided themselves on being self-reliant. In addition, to not fight back was frustrating to the opponent as it denied them the opportunity to validate or further their own reputation as a fighter. Girls with such a reputation were thought to invite chastisement not only for their embarrassing display, but for not holding up their end of the challenge. The potential was set for these girls to become targets for those wanting an easy win to set their reputation as a fighter in motion.

*People will know that you are weak if you drop to someone then they know that you're not a fighter, you can't fight back, you don't do anything. So heaps of people start ganging up on you, getting smart, hitting you...But if you just stay there and just take everything that they're giving you then you won't be known as a weakling or anything like that. When you drop means? Like you start crying and you run away or something like that. Ally, 14, #66*

Engaging in a fight presented girls with an opportunity to receive direct external validation from their like-minded peers. Few girls admitted that they would abandon this opportunity and risk the consequences of a ruined reputation. Even if they did not want to fight, they would weigh up the options and decide on the best way to avoid damaging their social identity.

*That's the logical thing...That's what I don't get, they say you're the smarter one if you walk away, you're the smarter one if you don't do it but it just pretty much ruins your reputation. You can't get it back easily. How? That you can't be trusted like if you say yeah you're going to back them up in a fight then they think that you wouldn't so they wouldn't ask you. Mia, 14, #85*

*Me and the group that I used to get around with were always the top dogs, I suppose you'd say. Always the ones that all the people our age look the other way to and I hated that. We'd still have people that would talk to us and stuff but most people were scared of us. What made you scary? We weren't gonna back down to anyone. You did not like being in that circle? No, but I stayed, coz they*

*were just always there for me I suppose and real, I had no one else, I just had no one else. Meg, 14, #81*

Almost as important as having a reputation for fighting was having a reputation that you would be there for your mates if they got in trouble. By not backing down a girl substantiated her reputation as a fighter to her pseudo family of peers. Other girls wanted her on their side to 'watch their back'. The relationship serves the interests of both parties as protection was reciprocated and fostered strong bonds of loyalty between girls. It also contributed to a girl's sense of security and reinforced that she was not alone in her world.

*I've always got my schoolgirls...Those girls are like my number one...You gotta belong somewhere. Bee, 15, #44*

*They know I'd back them up in anything and they know that I'm stronger than them so they know that if I'm always there and if they get a hiding they know that I would get involved...So it's like they'll back me up in a fight and I'd back them up in a fight. Gina, 16, #47*

*Nearly all the time my friends get involved, I've never had a one on one thing with a person. I'll always tell someone that I'm gonna get into a fight and they'd always want to back me. My friends want to be there for me. Olli, 15, #35*

*Coz I know if I hit them and then I could tell other people too and they would hit them too for hitting me. All of us stick up for our friends. Sammie, 14, #53*

For other girls the reason for not backing down from a fight had another dimension that included not only their peer group but boys who held their romantic interest. As will be discussed later in this report, girls were often encouraged to fight by boys and this was viewed as a way to obtain male attention. Not only was violence central to a girl's social identity, but it could also advance her in the competition for male attention.

*If they think she is chickening out boys will tease her, she is chicken shit. Then if there are hot boys watching she has to fight. Seems like girls are forced to fight even if they don't want to if a crowd is watching and it ends up bad and she lost or something the boys will still say she is chicken. Focus group comment*

*I reckon some girls do fight for attention, attention from boys so that boys will say 'Yeah she won, she's tough'. Sue, 16, #43*

The implications of all this is that while we have girls who are 'hard out' fighters and consider fighting as an extension of themselves, we also have girls who enter into fights because they either want to create or need to maintain a reputation. These girls engage in fighting because they have limited alternative options if they want to remain socially adequate in their peer world. The problems to address here are at least twofold: lack of options for the girls and peers who endorse girls' violent behaviour.

Girls whose social identities revolved around their reputation for violent behaviour sometimes unexpectedly found themselves indirectly implicated in a fight, or potential

fight, between other girls. These other girls, often described as 'try hards' were usually younger and less fight savvy. They would cast threats using the name of the known tough girl and brag about their alliance. The intent was to scare off the opponents as well as build up their own reputation.

*I have a girl that's scared of me at the moment...A girl in her form class which I'm real good friends with told her that I'm meant to be smashing her and she's really scared...It's just like I didn't even know that this was going on till I got told. Olli, 15, #35*

*Sometimes other girls say that coz they have their little bitchy scraps and stuff like bitchy talks then they bring my name up and I'm not even involved and they say "Oh yeah Carla is going to smash you" and blah, blah, blah, then I don't hear about it until I get in trouble for it and like "What the hell I'm not going to smash that person". Carla, 14, #110*

This is a difficult predicament because those trying to intervene or target the main instigator may be drawn to the girl with the known reputation and she might be innocent of involvement. Furthermore, while the girls in the quotes above did not enter into a scuffle, there is the potential that a girl might be spurred to take up the fight to protect her reputation from being tarnished.

Girls also got indirectly implicated in violence when other girls asked them to fight for them. The practice of asking a girl to fight on their behalf is common. Girls who were frequently approached tended to have an established reputation for fighting or were closely associated with a group of girls who were reputed to be tough girls. (To a lesser degree, girls were also asked to fight for others because of their physical stature or ethnicity. These points will be discussed in the next section of the report.) Girls known for their fighting sometimes took the request as a positive acknowledgement of their reputation and, as a result, it contributed to validating their social identity. Some girls fulfilled the request because they wanted the attention, which in turn would bolster their reputation, while Sarah, quoted below, viewed the opportunity to fight as a somewhat mundane recreation.

*It made me feel real special when I was young. Because I was needed yeah. I think back now the only reason why think I was fighting was to get the attention. Gina, 16, #47*

*You fought for someone else? Coz I felt like scrapping her out. Just like I wasn't angry with her but I was just keen for a fight I suppose. What did you get out of it? I don't know it was just 'thanks for fighting'. I suppose coz they asked me in the first place they must have thought that I would do it anyway. Sarah, 16, #83*

The request came as an imposition to other girls who could not be bothered to involve themselves in someone else's problems or viewed the opponent as insignificant and not worthy of their interest. Alternatively some girls did not want to risk getting into trouble for a fight that did not have meaning or value for them or their reputation

*She's like 'Can you give these girls a hiding for me' and I was like 'Who' and she told me and I was like 'No' and I was like 'What did they do?' and she was like 'Called me fat' and I was like 'Nah'. Sammie, 14, #53*

The situation of girls fighting on behalf of other girls complicates intervention, especially if it only focuses on girls directly involved in the altercation. If this is the case, it is possible and probable that the original antagonist, who was instrumental in arranging her own substitution, evades responsibility for her part in the fight. In addition, depending on the outcome of the fight, her grievance with the other girl may remain unresolved and has the potential to arise again.

#### **Lauren's Story**

When Lauren started college she got a reputation as a tough girl. She thinks it was because of the way she looked and the girls she hung out with. But actually she considers herself a little softy. "When I look in the mirror I just see Lauren innocent face". She says that many girls at school think that all the bigger, more athletic Maori girls are fighters and "if only people got to know them, they would find out we are not". She laughs and complains about all the little skinny Pakeha girls who start a scrap with other girls then find themselves challenged with a serious fight. The Pakeha girls come to her and her mates and "expect one of us big ones to do it for them." She explains, "If you drag in a big person and they fight that person, then that person would get someone bigger to come along and then it just makes things a whole lot worser." It always seems that the Maori girls come off looking like the problem. Lauren admits that sometimes the Maori girls do instigate the fights and they get in trouble for it, but often it is Pakeha girls behind it and they don't get in trouble. "The Pakeha girls make it look like it was all the Maori girls' fault, like they started everything but really they didn't." Lauren has never been in a fight, but she has been around many. She does intervene but only if she feels it is not a fair fight because of the size or number of people involved. Then she just pulls girls apart so it does not go any further and no one gets badly injured. Lauren decided to leave school when she was 15 because of too many distractions in her life. A year later she changed her mind and now wants to get her NCEA levels but education staff told her not to bother.

As mentioned earlier, a social identity based on a reputation for violence can be useful for a girl as it can serve to repel potential challenges. However, some girls complained about the stigmatization that came with this same reputation and how it would also repel potential friends. At times these girls felt they were unjustly judged without people getting to know them. Such discrimination contributes to alienation and can become fuel for arguments and retaliation.

*I don't know, it's just the way that they think we are like if we walk around the school coz we've got a big group of us that hang out together. We all go onto the field and have a smoke and once they all see us, they're like turn the other way so they just don't like talking to us. Enya, 15, #45*

Other girls felt they unfairly inherited a reputation based on past events or stereotypes and they were prejudged without the opportunity to reveal their true selves.

*Oh well there's kind of a reputation thingy, coz before I came to this school they had other girls that were like (myself) and they used to get into fights and stuff and so we came here I starting hearing that these girls are scared of us. They're intimidated by us and I thought that was really stupid coz we're really shy, we're actually shy girls, and like really nice girls...Yeah, I find that quite funny coz everyone's like says coz there's like young girls come up to me who are friends of their friends and they come up to me and they're like 'Oh can you smash this girl, coz your tough and stuff' and I'm like a small person who doesn't even like to get involved in stuff, but coz they hear 'Oh she's -----, she's got all these girls with her' and that's how it all starts. Mel, 16, #37*

As mentioned earlier, a social identity based on a reputation for violence could serve the interests of girls by repelling potential opponents. However, it is rarely acknowledged how this reputation can hamper girls in developing respectful relationships and appreciating each other's individuality. This is a consideration that would prove vital in designing violence prevention strategies.

#### Violence viewed as part of a fair and just process

Girls turned to violence as part of a process to bring justice in their lives and address the perceived injustices that affronted them. They regarded their use of violence as a way to rid themselves of problems, to shift perceptions, and to act upon their grievances. Violence represented another option and by choosing it girls stepped into a social arena where the power balance appeared to shift in their direction and where newly assumed autonomy provided them with a sense of self-control. Violence was undertaken with intent and purpose, and it was a part of a process that girls managed in a manner that they perceived as being just and fair.

Many of the girls of this study who engaged in violence considered themselves to be disadvantaged compared to other girls who had clothes, boyfriends, status or opportunities that they would like to have. These girls also thought that other people judged them disparaging and considered them as inferior. For girls reliant on external validation, the unfairness of these condemnations was especially hurtful. Their grievances fuelled indignation and they would look for ways to redress these denigrations.

*If somebody has more money than me, if somebody has a better job than my Mum does, has real fancy cellphones...If people come and rub it in my face that they have more money than me then I'll get angry at them. Olli, 15, #35*

*It was like sort of these girls that were giving us grief and stuff like that, but they just thought of us like, we're not rich, we can't afford stuff...If they stated to give you lip and stuff that's when you do physical actions. Sue, 16, #43*

*I just look at someone and I hate them. Like me and (friend) can be walking and we see someone and we just hate them coz of the way they look. Sometimes the things they wear or the way they act, the way they walk, the way they talk, everything. Sammie, 14, #53*

*Chicks picking on each other and stuff, it's a lot to do with you wanting what that girl has but you can't. Emma, 18, # 68*

Girls also spoke how the indignation they felt from those holding authority over them such as teachers, police, and parents incited acts of violence.

*I was just angry again with my parent's coz they didn't want me to so I just did it to annoy them. What kinds of things? Smash things, glass and stuff, shoot animals, birds and our chooks. Tasha, 14, #18*

Frequently girls thought that their part in an altercation was being exaggerated or disproportionately attributed and they were blamed or punished unfairly. They viewed their actions as minimal especially considering what they were capable of doing or in comparison to what they might have personally experienced or delivered at another time.

*I threw a bottle at her and then she just got up and hit me. It was an empty bottle and it didn't even hit her. Dale, 15, #1*

*All I did was stole a phone. I grabbed it out of her hand and then she like stood up and then I like pushed her and then my mates started bashing her and kicking her in the head. Nat, 16, #62*

*Well I didn't really hurt her, I pulled her hair and like just punched at her but I didn't hurt her too much...Then we had a little fight on the road. Nat, 16, #62*

Violence served as affirmation that some form of justice, albeit their own justice, existed in a world where girls frequently complained of feeling victimized or unfairly persecuted. Consequently, girls used violence to impose their own standards of retribution or punishment based on what they deemed as the appropriate reaction for an infraction or wrongdoing.

*I was just sitting in class and this girl was giving me shit because I'm (ethnicity) and I'm poor that kind of stuff. So I stood up and I bitch slapped her and then she stood up and pushed me so I jumped over the desk and I just started hitting her. Ally, 14, #66*

Girls construed justice as a means to even the score. Having been on the receiving end of an offensive comment, a snub or a punch, a girl redressed the one-sidedness of this action with retaliation thus restoring a state of equilibrium to the situation. At times girls admitted the smugness they felt when an opportunity allowed them to get one-up on their opponent, which was also deemed a fair and just result considering the nuisance they had endured.

*People just get my number and think it's cool to text me. I want to annoy them...I'll be like 'I'm gonna give you a hiding after school' and they'll just be like 'who is this' and I won't text them back. Olli, 15, #35*

Their desire to obtain justice extended beyond themselves as a significant aspect of their involvement in violence is to protect their pseudo family.

*We walked past this one guy and he called (name) fat and she got a bit offend but forgot about it. He kept calling her fat and starting chucking bottles so we turned around and beat him and his friend up. We just had to bring them down a notch. Bee, 15, #44*

*My (relative) saw her walk past and then she's like 'that's the girl that got me stood down' and I's like 'OK', she was going to bash her but she was too scared so I went. She didn't ask me but she looked at me like 'Can you please do it?' Nat, 16, #62*

Using violence as a process to set things right had the potential to become a pattern of toing and froing between girls, resulting in an escalation of behaviours. With both girls wanting to even the score, they engage in a hard battle with neither wanting to concede the superior position. Even after the initial altercation had subsided grudges and clashes would surreptitiously continue thus making it difficult for an outsider to know if the hostility had ended or would ignite again once the girls were out of view.

*She hit me first. Coz it started at the pool...she spat water on me so when she got to the end I grabbed her hair and pulled it and she spat more water on me so I walked away. At the end of the day she ran up behind grabbed my hair and punched me and I'm like OK so I turned around and smacked her in the face. She kept hitting me and I grounded her. Emily, 12.5, #17*

*When girls go into a fight they go in really tough and really hard and they don't stop and they don't get over it. They want to get each other back. Toni, 17, #39*

The predominant justification girls held for fighting rested on their opponent throwing the first punch. If this happened then it was argued that the fight was fair and just, because the other girl started it and there was a need for self-defence. This rationale was supported by the fact that parents had instructed some girls that violence for the sake of self-defence was acceptable. However others presumed that in such situations authorities would judge a girl's behaviour as a reasonable case of needing to protect themselves, therefore punishment, if any, would be more lenient. Many girls began their account of a girl fight with the mantra 'she hit me first'.

So ardent were girls to have their opponent throw the first punch that they would go to great lengths to provoke the reaction. They described egging a girl on by getting in her face, taunting her over a period of time and baiting her with verbal abuse. Becoming aware of what transpired before the first punch was thrown is significant, especially when attempting to assign responsibility or blame. To only look at the altercation itself is short-sighted and may cause information to be overlooked that would be vital for preventing a recurrence.

*She hit me first and then I just had enough of it. Kina, 13, #36*

*Yeah if they hit me first, if they make the first move then yeah I'll fight them back. Emily, 12, #17*



*I would be like hit me first coz if they hit me first I'm allowed to smash them that's what my parents said. If someone hurts me first, they don't care they would get me out of trouble coz they hit me first. But if I start it first they won't get me out of trouble so I would get them to hit me first. Mia, 14, #85*

Within their own understanding of just and fair behaviour, many girls spoke of the unwritten rules that determined what was or was not acceptable behaviour with other girls' boyfriends. When a girl breached these rules, she was almost always a target of retaliation. Infidelity on the part of a boyfriend was generally seen as the fault of the other girl as she was expected to know better.

*Cheating or sleeping with their boyfriend, like usually it'd be if a girls going out with a boy and that boy gets with another girl then his girlfriend will want to get the girl that he got with...The girl should know best or they should know that he's got a girlfriend... It's just how it works really. Cee, 16, #24*

*He cheated on me and I found out through his mates and then I found the girl's number and I was like 'man that's so nasty of you (girl's name) how could you do that?' Then I ended up calling her a whore coz I was really angry...She punched me in the face...There've been fights after fights after fights with other girls. I face the girls and it becomes big, you know. I just go text them or I see them and I say something and it gets me in trouble. Stevi, 16, #32*

*Girls real easy fall in love with boys, other girl's boys. It's like you having your period and only having one tampon and another girl takes it. So what have you got. You get into a fight because if she is a friend she broke the trust. Focus group comment*

Several girls, particularly those who described a regular involvement in girl fighting and street fighting, spoke of the rules that governed their decisions when to use violence or when to intervene. The rationale behind these conventions was to keep the fight just and fair. The existence of such a practice gives indication of the normality of this type of physical violence in the lives of these girls.

*If my friend caused the fight because she was telling lies, spreading rumours, I would not step in. She needs to learn a lesson for causing shit. She deserves it. But if someone else jumps in I would jump in. If it was a clean one I would not jump in. Focus group comment*

*Someone fighting with a member of the family, it would depend if I would jump in. Depends on what she did, if she deserves it. Focus group comment*

*If one of the girls got all her friends to jump one of my friends while she's by herself then I would (get involved in a fight). If they slept with one of my friends' boyfriends then I would. I would for just the major stuff, not the little stuff, like 'Oh you slapped my friend', and 'Oh you called my friend a bitch'. I wouldn't do that. Yeap, if they try to threaten my family, stuff like that, course something would happen. Sue, 16, #43*



It becomes difficult to convince girls not to turn to acts of violence when the practice is instilled in their minds and embedded in their customs as part of their process for obtaining justice. It also raises the question as to why these girls have abandoned or negated conventional systems of justice. Insight gained from this study suggests that these girls view conventional systems as prejudice therefore discriminatory or ineffectual because the full dynamics of a situation were not comprehended, thus not considered. For these girls to turn away from using violence to right the wrongs they must have the opportunity to rebuild trust in justice systems that allows them to tell their whole story.

### **Bek's Story**

Bek at 15 is well known and well respected by girls who say she is tough but fair. As a young child, Bek's (relative) gave her a few rules for fighting that she continues to follow. She is not allowed to start a fight, she is not allowed to build it up and make it worse, she is not to fight girls who are smaller or younger than her nor pick on someone that isn't at her ability. Bek sticks to these rules because she wants to make her (relative) proud. Bek belongs to a crew or brotherhood as she says. A handful of girls are members and Bek, along with another young woman, started it. Bek maybe the youngest but she holds the lead position. "We don't go out unless we're together and we always let each other know what we're up to when we're not together." Bek's rules for fighting hold true for her crew. There are fortnightly crew meetings where the girls' talk about their lives, loves, families and even school. They form a support network that Bek claims "I don't know where I'd be without them." The crew regularly trains together, as Bek realises that they are only as strong as their weakest link. She has concerns about this because one of her girls was not up to par with the rest of the crew and it would tarnish the reputation of the crew if they ever lost a fight. During a recent challenge, the weaker girl started on the female opponents while Bek and the rest of the crew took on "all the guys and then just finished them up". "We are not allowed to start it but when they do something, we couldn't just forget about it, we're not that type". Bek intends to finish her schooling and become a leader in the New Zealand protective services.

### Violence as a means for social mobility

This section of the report concludes by pointing out that violence furnishes some girls with the opportunity for social mobility. By taking on violent actions, they move their status from that of being passive or neutral to that of being an aggressor or even a leader. Through the manner in which these girls have associated themselves with violent behaviour, they transcend social realms where they were previously excluded or overlooked, or not even considered, because of the conventional norms associated with their female gender and young age. The media documents this transition well and we only have to look at the increase of young women being depicted in video games and movies as physically aggressive tough girls, whereas a decade ago young women tended to be portrayed in supportive roles with the focus of forming or maintaining relationships.

When a girl functions beyond the confines of expected behaviour, she redefines power relationships and upsets social order. No longer does her femininity or youth hold her

back. By drawing upon the power of this new freedom, she fortifies her sense of independence as this contributes to her self-validation. The sense of empowerment eliminates that which might restrict her, allowing her to become more than she ever thought she would. For many girls, stepping beyond these confines sets them on their journey to achieve their future dreams; whether it is career, school or family. Yet for the girl who has had to fight her way through life, moving through these restrictions allows her to be 'extra-ordinary' in unexpected ways, providing her with a means to achieve a new status in her life.

*They treat me like a boy, but I was pretty much the one with the most respect out of all of them (boys). Coz I wouldn't take any shit and they'd think I was scared of them at first. They're like 'want a scrap bitch' and I was like 'yep let's go'...They'd started fighting me and then they kept on backing down...They use to call me 'Jake the Muss.' I just laughed and I called them 'Beth Heke'. Jude, 13, #29*

*My daughter, well my daughter is like the person who looks up to me. She's the same age, but she calls me Mum. Yeah a lot of my mates that I've know call me Mum...I'll look out for them. Kina, 13, #3*

While it appears young females have undergone a sudden change, in reality there have always been girls who have used violence, but they were the exception and not central to public attention, nor that of their peers. However, as violence has become a standardised and glorified feature of our entertainment industry, as well a normalised part of our society, girls' violence has advanced accordingly. There are many people still struggling to grasp girls' departure from entrenched gender norms, especially when it is associated with violence and it is not uncommon for comments to reflect surprise when of hearing about or observing girls coming to blows or a girl cracking a bottle over another's head or even proficiently 'cursing a blue streak'. For many conventional thinkers even putting together the words 'girl' and 'fight' borders on being an oxymoron. As a consequence, there is debate in the academic literature that girls' violence has the potential to be judged unfairly harsh by those who view it as not only an act of violence but also a breach of female etiquette. In contrast, another point of contention exists which questions if authorities recognise the seriousness of girl fighting or minimize it as 'just a catfight'. These perspectives influence the practice of those in authority who work with girls and contribute to inconsistency in our strategies for prevention and intervention of girls' violence.

As discussed, violence can function to move a girl from a world that she views as having limited opportunity into a different social sphere; one where violence empowers her with a status and a sense of control. For these girls intervention will be difficult unless society presents them with an equitable replacement.

## **ISSUES OF CONCERN ASSOCIATED WITH GIRLS' INVOLVEMENT IN VIOLENT AND ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR**

This section of the report focuses on issues that are associated with girls' involvement in violent and anti-social behaviour. It is based on themes that recurred throughout the focus groups and interviews with girls. Where available quantitative findings collected through the questionnaire conducted with Year 9 and 10 boys and girls has been included.

The discussion will not repeat commonly known information regarding risk factors that contribute to youth offenders that are already well documented in a number of New Zealand resources (for example see Becroft, 2009; Crawford & Kennedy, 2008). These resources provide a useful extension of the World Health Organisation's (2002) summary which identified the factors that contribute to the propensity of youth perpetrated violence to be (a) linked with the personality and behaviour of the young person, (b) associated with the influences of family and peers, (c) connected with social, political and cultural factors. This material presents a valuable background for understanding the issues that can facilitate our youth into violent behaviour.

Finding resources, particularly New Zealand material, to advance our knowledge of gender specific issues that play a part in girls' use of violence is more difficult and it is hoped that the following discussion will contribute to this void. However, there is a growing pool of international literature examining the correlation of girls' use of violence to variables such as parental violence (Moretti, Obsuth, Odgers & Reebye, 2006); victimisation and trauma (Schaffner, 2007); gang involvement (Batchelor, 2009); inner city violence (Ness, 2004); relational aggression (Chesney-Lind, Morash & Irwin, 2007). While New Zealand has minimal resources specific to girls' violence, Dennehy's (2005) Christchurch based analysis of adult women who are perpetrators of violence is a useful resource. Retrospectively it identifies themes that were prominent in their younger years, giving insight into factors that facilitated their use of violence.

Before beginning, it should be reiterated the following list includes issues that may directly or indirectly impact on a girl's association with violent and anti-social behaviour. These should not be considered definite, but rather points of concern that elevate consideration of a girl's situation. Nor should they be considered in isolation but be taken into account in relation to the presence of other worrying factors.

### **Issues of concern**

Adults contribute to delinquency	Intimate partner violence
Brothers as fathers	Larger body
Changing schools	Media
Competition for boys	Older boyfriends
Drugs and alcohol	Police intervention
Early puberty	Pregnancy
Entertained by girl fighting	Provoked by boyfriends
Exposure to family violence	Racism
Family reputation	Reporting violence and anti-social behaviour
Frequent relocation	School intervention
Gang association	Self harm
Homophobia	Self abuse history
Intervening in fights	Stress

### **Adults contribute to delinquency**

Adults, including parents and their friends, extended family, older siblings, older friends and, sometimes, adult strangers contributed to girls' delinquent behaviour, especially involving drug and alcohol use. While parents may have had rules about alcohol consumption or purchase that they expected their daughters to follow, other adults acted unaware of these rules or deliberately superseded them.

Many girls described obtaining alcohol from parents when they were under the legal drinking age, but this practice varied significantly. This could involve asking for and receiving a bottle of wine or six pack of beer or a ready-to-drink product to be shared with friends and consumed at a special occasion, which was known to the parents, such as a friend's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday party. This could be a safe and uneventful evening. However, with each parent contributing to their daughter's supply for the party, girls would end up with at least a bottle or six-pack each. This, along with the availability of other alcohol being brought to the event, could lead to intoxication.

*Get boyfriends or their parents to buy it (alcohol) for them. Emily, 12.5, #17*

*My parents buy it for me, they don't really care much so they buy it, they don't really care what I do. Tasha, 14, #18*

Parents or adults who would not readily part with their money negotiated chores with their underage girl in exchange for purchasing alcohol products. Other parents decided it was better that they supply their underage daughter with alcohol rather than risking that she would engage in illegal activity to obtain it.

*We had to help clean up the house and do the gardens so I had to earn the money and so we could get his Mum to buy our alcohol. Ally, 14, #66*

*Most 14 and 15 year olds can get alcohol from older sisters, mum, parent or you just give parents' money to get it and petrol money. When I was not allowed to drink a year ago when I was 14, I'd steal it from the shop. Walk in with a bag, grab it and walk down another aisle with no one in it and put it in. Or you just stick it down your top. Now that I am allowed to drink its like my whole family gets it for me. Mum decided why not let me drink it if I was just going to steal it and get into more trouble than them just buying it for me. Focus group comment*

Girls also described how extended family members, and parents and their friends assisted them to obtain marijuana and narcotics. It became easier for girls to get their drug of choice if a family member also used or, in some cases, grew the product. Similarly, they felt less restricted using the product if the adult was also a user.

*Marijuana I can buy off my cousin. I can buy trips off my cousin. I can buy cocaine off my cousin. Speed, who did I get that off, I got it off my boyfriend's Mum coz she does it so I got that off of her. Gina, 16, #47*

*I was having a session and Dad walked in and goes 'yeah, pack me a bowl'. Geri, 17, #25*

*She (mother) was the first person to give me my first bit of cannabis. Yeah, 13, 14 maybe nah 14 definitely not 13...Nana used to smoke it with my mum when my mum was a kid. Nikki, 17, #20*

*Me and my (sibling) have to fend for ourselves coz they (parents) are into drugs, alcohol and all that...Yeah they grew their own weed, sold it. Pip, 18, #26*

### **Brothers as fathers**

A theme emerged in the interviews where a girl without a father at home, sometimes filled his role with her older brother. When this happened, the girl revered her brother and followed his example. While the arrangement appeared innocent and admirable, it often resulted in the girl modelling herself after a sibling who possibly lacked maturity and had a history of criminal behaviour. Not only could the situation present the girl with an unhealthy role model, but could entangle her in his criminal activity and make it central to her life as well. For some tagging along on a burglary or being on the sideline of a fight added to the excitement of having an older brother.

*The majority of me and my friends we don't have father figures. Has someone stepped into the role? My older brother, he's only 16 and we're only two years apart but he doesn't look his age and I respect him and I look up to him as my father figure at the moment. There's no one else I would let take those shoes anyway...I only listen to my brother. Bee, 15, #44*

*Older brother gives hiding to sisters' partners when they hit them. Coz he (older brother) was like, coz Mum was single, he was like the head guy for all of us. Sammie, 14, #53*

### **Changing schools**

Changing schools presented difficulties for many girls who described the anxiety of feeling alone and vulnerable in a new environment. Girls spoke about how their haste to be socially accepted at a new school caused them to indiscriminately join groups of girls that they otherwise would have avoided, consequently getting lumbered with their reputation and caught up in their activities. As a result, the enemies of the group became the enemies of the new girl, sometimes unbeknownst to her. These girls felt trapped in the group and feared that leaving would be taken as rejection making them a potential target for retaliation.

A new girl was also at risk of being greeted with hostility, particularly if other girls viewed her as possible competition for popularity, boyfriends or sports status. Isolated and alone, she would be targeted as a warning to not overstep her mark. The same girl might find herself caught between girls in a competition for her friendship and any show of preference would cause resentment. Other new girls came to a new school with the aim of forming their own group and set about building a reputation that would distinguish them. It would only be a matter of time before they regain the reputation they left behind at their former school.

While all of this is particularly relevant for girls changing school in mid-year, similar held true for new entrants to college, particularly if they came from a smaller

school/community and were faced with integrating into a larger one. This could easily evolve into girls of one school/area becoming antagonistic to those of another.

### **Competition for boys**

Most girls of this study considered competition over boys' attention to be the main reason girls fought with each other. This theme of heterosexual competition was present throughout all the age groups of females who participated in this study. As such it mirrors the traditional mindset that to be 'complete' a girl must have a boyfriend. Self-validation for many of these girls was integrated with how they perceived others viewed them.

Girls described how they would lay claim to a particular boy then work towards winning his full attention. They would become angry if another girl encroached on their romantic interest or even shared the same goal. Girls viewed other girls as rivals and sought ways to heighten their advantage in the pursuit, which might include using relational aggression to discredit or embarrass the competition or verbally or physically scaring them off the chase. It should also be noted that the 'competition' did not have to be personally known to a girl to be identified as hated and brought into disrepute.

*I don't know coz we just want to be wanted from the guy that we like. We want them to want us and if the guy that we want likes someone else, we'll go out of our way to get, like who we want. Coz girls want to have someone around to call them pretty, they want to feel special, they want to be like 'Yeah I'm with him, he's hot'. They want to be known as that they have a hot boyfriend. I don't know girls just do that. Yeah they do do that and the guy doesn't care about them, the guy just wants to see how many girls he can get that are pretty and you know they don't care about personality or who you are they just want pretty girls they can say 'Yeah I just slept with this girl'. They tell their mates, 'Yeah that's the girl and that other girl' and it seems like they have competitions, probably don't but it seems like they do of who can get who and the girls fight and then it's really emotional but the boys don't care and that's how most girls get into fights because of the boys doing that. Stevi, 16, #32*

This concentrated effort to gain male attention had indirect consequences for girls' behaviour, such as inciting aggression between girls when long-standing friendships were abandoned for the pursuit of a boyfriend. In addition, girls frequently targeted the boy's former girlfriend, causing retaliation and sparking another chapter to a girl fight.

### **Drugs and alcohol**

Alcohol featured significantly in the social activities of almost all the girls who were interviewed. Alcohol was considered easy to obtain through older friends and relatives. Girls also described standing outside a liquor store asking strangers to buy for them and stealing bottles and bladders out of wine boxes from grocery stores and bottle shops.

*To be honest 14, 13 or 14, 15 year olds can get it just as easily as I can and I'm 17. So if they put the age up 18 year olds will still have cousins or parents to buy alcohol, there's always someone who will supply alcohol no matter how much you try to stop it. Angela, 17, #34*

Drinking to the point of intoxication was a standard practice on at least one evening of the weekend with a few girls stating that they consumed alcohol during the course of their day. These girls gave this as a reason for not attending class or for leaving school during the day. Most girls were not concerned about their personal safety when drinking because they were in the company of friends. Several had been raped while drunk and some had made bad decisions about sexual activity that they admittedly regretted but this did not influence their drink habits.

*He was hooking up with me and stuff, but I didn't really like him. You hooked up with him because you were drunk? Yeah, I was just like ooooh yuck why did I do that...That was the second time it had happened to me and both times I was like thinking I'll never get drunk again, but I have heaps. Tasha, 14, #18*

Most had been introduced to alcohol in their early teens, with a few having experienced intoxication at intermediate school age. At some point most girls had drunk until they were sick, passed out or fell asleep. Several had been taken to the hospital because of the amount they had consumed and a few had multiple experiences of this. A couple of girls were involved in drinking programmes.

Alcohol factored into girl fighting both directly and indirectly. Girls blamed alcohol for making them lose control and attack another person, not always a female. The alcohol was described as heightening emotions leading to a violent outburst.

*Me and (name) had a fight, I was absolutely drunk at the time, I think I lost it or something...Beat her up and pulled a knife on her and she ran down the road and called the cops. Got arrested for that. How much? Fifteen bottles of beer maybe...Start like 4 o'clock then sort of finish at 7, 7:30. Pip, 18, #26*

Girls also explained several ways alcohol circuitously contributed to their fights with other girls. Antagonism arose when an intoxicated girl particularly made advances towards another girl's romantic partner or publically behaved in ways that were considered licentious or overly flirtatious. Similarly, when under the influence of alcohol, some girls became cheeky or defiant, and their words incited reactions from others. The above behaviours sometimes received immediate response or were played out over time through relational aggression directed at discrediting the girl's reputation.

*When alcohol is involved there's fighting coz girls spill out more stuff. They say what they shouldn't. Focus group comment*

While alcohol gave some girls a sense of bravado that led them into fighting, there were girls who took a more serious attitude when they were intent on fighting and remained sober.

*I don't drink when I fight coz I don't know who I'm hitting. Nat, 16, #62*

The other drug that girls used was marijuana, though to a much lesser extent. Again girls described the ease of purchasing it, claiming that it was always less than a few minutes away. Regular marijuana use was not as prevalent as alcohol with many girls



stating a preference for the later, often expressing concern that ‘dope would do your head in’ and that ‘they were not that stupid’. However, there were girls who used marijuana on a daily basis, smoking it before school, at breaks and then afterwards, as a result their school attendance and performance suffered. While girls spoke about experimenting with acid and ecstasy, and the relevant ease of obtaining them, these drugs were not as popular as alcohol.

The girls who engaged in serious assaults used both marijuana and alcohol, although not necessarily at the same time nor were they always under the influence of one or the other when the assaults occurred.

### **Drugs or alcohol involved in verbal fighting**

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated they had involvement in a verbal fight with a teenage peer, in the last year.

- 65.2% or 2232 of all students report having one or more verbal fights with a teenage peer in the last year. Of these, 18.5% or 413 indicated that they were drunk or stoned at the time.

### **Drugs or alcohol involved in physical fighting**

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated they had involvement in a physical fight with a teenage peer, in the last year.

- 35.3% or 1210 of all students report having one or more physical fights with a teenage peer in the last year. Of these, 22.7% or 275 indicated that they were drunk or stoned at the time.

### **Abbi's Story**

Abbi got in with the wrong crowd. She had just moved into the area and started at a new high school. She explained that her new friends got her into trouble with other girls, the police, the school but mainly her parents. She was involved with fights, truancy and arrests. This was mostly because of her drinking. One night it was a whole bottle of Jagermeister and she ended up foaming at the mouth and had to be taken to hospital. She told herself she was never going to get into that state again. So now Abbi gets a box of 24 KGB and can drink about half before she ‘comas out’. Drugs also played a part in her life. Often it was ecstasy, sometimes acid, but mainly it was dope. She would have a session before school, at interval, then lunch and then when she got home. It was easy to get, a friend’s parents were suppliers, so she and her friend just took what they wanted. Abbi is trying to change her ways and is sorry for all the dramas she has put her parents through. But as she says “life has been pretty shit” and she has tried to kill herself twice. What is behind all this? Well just recently her 20 year-old boyfriend convinced her to have sex and when he got what he wanted, he ditched her for her best friend. This was upsetting, almost as much as when she was 13 and a 28 year-old guy raped her. Abbi is now 14 years old.



### **Early puberty**

Girls who matured ahead of their age mates were at heightened risk of becoming involved with violence or anti-social behaviour. A girl's advanced physical development often attracted the interest and attention of boys. This was a point of contention for other young females who were vying to be noticed. The situation was often sexualized and it was assumed that the more developed a girl was, the more she was sexually active. Their behaviour became the subject of gossip and speculation. Consequently, the more girls labelled her promiscuous, the more a girl defended herself. Loyal friends taking sides would escalate the tensions. The situation was cyclical as the girl's reputation for promiscuity furthered the interest of some boys adding to the disapproval of other girls who would in turn demean the girl.

Self-conscious of their early physical development, some girls shied away from school based activities that would cause them to be noticed by peers. Estranged from school and peers, these girls sought refuge amongst older peers, consequently being exposed to situations that were beyond their intellectual and emotional maturity.

*When my mate first met me she said 'Can you go buy me alcohol' and I'm like 'What I'm only 13' and she's like 'No you're not you are 17, 18'. I'm, like 'Got news for you mate I'm really 13', and she was like 'Wow'. Like most people go 'Buy me alcohol' and I'm like 'I'm only 13,' they're like 'So try go buy me alcohol'.  
Kina, 13, #36*

### **Entertained by girl fighting**

Girls commented that girl fights attracted large audiences and even a threat to fight, such as a verbal fight could draw a crowd. Attracting attention was the goal for a few girls, who, to the disappointment of others would be all talk and no action. But when girls engaged in a physical altercation text messages would quickly be sent out and people would arrive to watch. The fear of getting in trouble for being part of the audience was not a deterrent and one girl described how a classroom emptied when students learned that a fight was going on. Fights were often captured on video or in photos and posted on to social networking websites, and this could help a girl wanting to build a reputation as a tough girl to get known.

In addition, girls described how boys, in particular, were attracted to girl fights and they encouraged the fighters. It was commented that boys found girl fighting entertaining and sexually stimulating. As a consequence, girl fighting could help a girl to get noticed by boys.

When asked about intervening in a girl fight, one boy commented on his questionnaire "Why would you stop a girl fight?" Recognising the prevalence of this type of attitude, a girl explained that when she fought girls she had to go at it hard because she did not trust that anyone would intervene, not her friends and not even her boyfriend.

*Two girls were fighting and a huge mass of boys come running out and they were climbing up the fences trying to get into the area the fight was going on. Some of them had their phones out videoing it. Focus group comment*

As mentioned earlier, contemporary media entertainment has made a feature of girl fighting. It is commonplace and central in an industry that is contributing to the

glorification and normalising of violence. Similarly, girl fighting is portrayed as sexual entertainment in pornographic material. It is concerning that this emphasizes brawl alongside beauty to attract male attention, while brain remains down played.

*Boys always seem to egg on a fight...People video them and they come and show you and like I've seen a video of my friend and this other girl and they were just having a fight and there were about a hundred people just standing around and videoing and laughing and cheering on each other. Toni, 17, #39*

*They just all stand around and cheer and stand in a big circle around them. It's mostly the boys that really cheer. Dale, 15, #1*

Although girls said that it was mainly boys who encouraged the fights, girls acknowledged that they were also in the audience. Some watched with the hope that a particular girl would lose, especially if they did not like her. Then there were girls who were appalled.

*Like when they watch girls fighting. I think it's like ridiculous... I think people watching fighting they're just as bad as them really, letting it happen. Not just at this school. Coz I went to another school. Angela, 17, #34*

Other girls were amused at the antics of the 'unladylike' behaviour used in an altercation, whether it was against male or female, as Wyndi describes below.

#### **Wyndi's Story**

Wyndi is 17. She usually gets pissed on the weekends with her friends and at least one of them gets into a scrap. She tells the story of how her best friend Jenna bottled a guy who was beating her boyfriend. Jenna lined up to have a second hit and an onlooker tackled her. Wyndi laughs and explains, "Oh it was so funny. The guy went to hospital (laughs), there was like foam out of his mouth and everything, it was crazy, honestly it was crazy." Wyndi doesn't get involved in fights. She just likes to watch. "Yeah I think it was like entertainment, coz like everyone like you know people are cracking up laughing, like people like cheering, you know." Wyndi does not think fighting is for a lady. "I do consider myself a lady. I don't consider myself this fucken mongrel chick that walks around in a big hoody with my hair tied back, you know, 'yeah I'm ready to take some chick on', it's like, I consider myself a lady and I don't think it's very ladylike. Yeah, like I said I laugh at it."

#### **Exposure to family violence**

Not all girls of the study had been exposed to family violence but many of those who had also used violence and anti-social behaviour. They described being raised in a culture of violence where they had seen and experienced aggressive behaviour being used as the way to achieve desired results. They had learned 'might makes it right'.

*I've been bought up in violence I've seen my Mum get beaten up, I've seen my sister get beaten up so I thought nah violence is all sweet, you know I went to school and had a lot of people who literally bullied me and stuff so I thought*

*violence is all sweet so I'd be like I'd punch them, throw things at them and swear at them and literally abuse the shit out of them. Gina, 16, #47*

Girls spoke of the frustration they felt when their mothers chose to stay with violent partners. A mother's passivity was viewed with disdain as her daughter vowed never to let herself be treated that way. These girls clearly thought that violence between their parents was not ok, yet, ironically, their violence against other girls was not judged similarly.

*My Dad's got a real short temper, he's like agro so he hit my mum and my mum hit him back...She's just a dick. Coz she doesn't do anything about it like just like 'I don't want to get your Dad in trouble'. And I was like well you idiot he made you bleed and she was like 'I don't care'. Emily, 12.5, #17*

Other girls reflected on the anger they held and linked it to witnessing violence within their family. Bottled up inside, this anger might explode when life got too challenging or words could not be found to express what they were feeling.

*I had to watch Dad choking Mum. I think that is where I get a lot of my anger from. Focus group comment*

While it was bad enough that a girl became entangled as a victim of her family's violence, it was made worse when others witnessed this but no one protected her, especially her mother. These girls learned quickly that they had to fend for themselves and they became insular and volatile using violence to physically and emotionally protect themselves. So familiar was their experience of receiving violence within their family situation that they sometimes stopped perceiving it as violence, as a result being thrown against a wall was not real violence like a punch up.

*He (mother's boyfriend) like grabs me by the throat and holds me on my bed and tells me he's gonna punch me in the throat. What does your Mum do? She laughs. I go 'It's not fucken funny Mum'. Jude, 13, #29*

*Nah I just remember he never hit us. Oh no, he did, but that's when you were allowed to hit your kids. I remember a couple of times I've been thrown against the wall and onto the floor but nothing real like a punch up or nothing like that. Sarah, 16, #83*

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### Exposure to family violence

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated they had seen violence at home, in the last year. This included physical fighting between adults in the household as well as physical fighting between an adult and a young person.

- 18.2% of all students (20.8% of girls and 15.8% of boys) report seeing violence at home in the past year.
  - Of the 2962 students engaging in relational aggression, physical aggression and cyberbullying against peers, 14.1% or 418 (16.3% of girls and 11.9% of boys) had witnessed physical fighting between adults at home.
  - Of the students engaging in relational aggression, physical aggression and cyberbullying against peers, 12.8% or 378 (14.3% of girls and 11.3% of boys) had witnessed physical fighting between a young person and an adult at home.
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### Family reputation

As mentioned earlier in this report, girls described how the behaviour and reputations of family members influenced their current interaction with others. For some girls, the stigma of their relative's reputation remained for considerable time and held weight not just with peers but with authorities too. These girls found themselves having to either defend their relatives name or defend themselves in an attempt to disassociate from the familial connection.

*I got picked on at (school)...They said coz of my sister. My sister has quite a bad kinda name here. She is not exactly the prize sister of the week...She can blow up at people and make quite a douche of herself...Probably the worst fight I've gotten into was when I smacked a girl in the head coz she came up to me and she was like 'Your sister...' Why is it my fault that my sister did that...She came over and pushed me so I kicked her in the shin and punched her in the head. Kim, 14, # 91*

*My Dad had a go at them one time and ever since that they've been against me. Sarah, 16, #83*

### Frequent relocation

As with changing schools, many of the girls who were interviewed spoke about frequently moving from one community to another. This limited the girl's ability to build a connection with the school and its staff to form any attachment. Without this bond, she lacked the interest and motivation to stay involved. Each move also meant that she had to re-establish herself in the community as well as with peers at school. Any links that were formed were severed with each move, giving the girl no experience of maintaining healthy relationships or developing respect or trust for another person.

These girls never had the opportunity feel the pride that comes with achieving a long-term goal or the satisfaction of commitment.

*Went to (town) and moved in with (relative A) for two, two and a half years, I took her cell phone and sort of used lots of credit on it...I came back here and moved into (relative B's) house...Well then did the whole boarding school for a year and a bit, got suspended then came back here. Then moved in with (relative C) and then got kicked out of there, stole her weed, so I moved in with (relative D), then moved in with this CYF lady, I don't like her and then eventually moved in with (name). Pip, 18, #26*

### **Gang association**

Only a few girls identified that they had personal involvement with a gang. These gangs included the Killer Bees, Red Devils and an unnamed Neo Nazi gang. However, many girls identified, historic and current, familial links with Lost Breed, Fourth Reich, Mongrel Mob, Black Power, Highway 61 and unnamed gangs. Several girls described how their family had been involved with gangs when living in the North Island and the Christchurch region. The move to the Tasman Region was intended to lessen or break involvement. However girls went on to share that through frequent visits to and from extended family members and friends these associations remained. It was also apparent from the interviews that it was common practice for such moves to be made into areas where there were existing connections. As a result these girls had exposure to or grew up in a gang-like culture. It was observable that this experience had impact on their attitude towards the use of violence. Some were very street-wise and actively involved with violence, whereas the opposite was true for a few girls who were committed to breaking the gang cycle in their family as their parents had been. As discussed previously, these girls were also faced with managing their families' reputation as being associated with a gang.

*There's quite a few people that are pretty scared of me. Coz either I look scary or they've seen me fight or they know my (relative) or (relative) or my (relative). They're scared that I might be tough coz I come from a family that's in a gang and that I would know how to defend myself coz they know how to defend themselves. Coz they're tough, I'll be tough coz they could have just teached me how to do anything like that, how to fight, how to defend myself and everything. Ally, 14, #66*

### **Ruby's Story**

Ruby can't recall ever learning to fight, it was just part of her. She did not know how hard her punches were until her older siblings started complaining when they would play fight. Until two years ago she lived in a location where gang fights occurred regularly. Her older brother was in a gang and opposing gangs would pick on her if they ever caught her on the street alone. She would punch herself out of those situations and run to her brother. He would retaliate, there would be fights, shootings and it was scary for a 12 year old. Two years ago she came to (place) and started to get into fights with girls. This recent one came about when two girls pulled a face at her mate and when asked what their problem was, they pulled the fingers and telling Ruby and her mate to fuck up. Ruby's mate shoved one of the girls, a fight broke out and Ruby's mate started taking a hiding until Ruby jumped in and took out both of the girls. She did not get hurt but she did a lot of damage to the two girls. The law came down heavy on her and there was talk of her being sent away. It has always been easy for Ruby to fight and friends of the other girls are hassling her in an attempt to get her in more trouble. She is trying hard not to go there. The last thing she wants is to be sent away from her brother and sisters. She describes what this would be like: "Me and my brothers and sisters are like a heart, my brothers are one side, my sisters the other. All of us make a human. They say without me, we won't be ourselves."

### **Homophobia**

In an environment where heterosexual competition is the source for many girl fights, relational aggression in the form of disparaging remarks about homosexuality are used to discredit a rival's suitability for male attention. As a result non-heterosexual behaviour is marginalised further from the mainstream fuelling homophobia. Yet, paradoxically, these same girls would titillate their heterosexual male onlookers with the ruse of being lesbian lovers, thus adding another dimension to their competition for male attention.

Girls who were openly non-heterosexual described being on the receiving end of homophobic comments and jokes, particularly in the school environment. This behaviour generally took the form of relational aggression, which could undermine their confidence and their comfort in a public environment. These girls found safety among their supportive peers and by accessing safe or queer friendly areas. However, some girls did face physical aggression and threats of physical violence. So upset was one girl from the verbal bashing she received that her heterosexual friend retaliated with physical violence against the perpetrator. It was not far from the minds of these girls that at sometime they might need to physically defend themselves from homophobia.

### **Intervening in fights**

Girls express hesitancy about intervening in a girl fight. Some feared for their own safety, others were concerned about appearing to take sides, while others worried that they would get disciplined if they were seen to be involved. Several girls described that when they attempted to intervene, others, both males and females, pulled them back or yell at them to stay out of it. Girls seemed even more reluctant to try to intervene in a fight between two boys, often citing they lacked the physical strength to be effective.

*There was like forty of us, thirty of us from this school went and watched. Like lots of people are telling everyone not to split it up and stuff, they just wanted to watch a fight. A couple of people would try to split it up and someone would go 'get out you fucken bitch. Don't stop the fight, don't stop the fight.' I wanted to stop it. Why didn't you intervene? Because everyone was telling you not to, they (the two girls) wanted the fight...Coz they like text each other before the fight and actually like planned it and stuff... The guy that they were fighting over he was there watching. Jo, 15, #33*

*They are all just like boo and like cheer and (boys' names) have this thing and they're like (makes noise indicating cheering) and it's real fun...(school crowd) cheer on. They don't try to break it up. No one tries to break it up. Emily, 12.5, #17*

Girls reiterate how many onlookers viewed girl fights as entertainment, therefore were not interested in stopping it from happening or calling it to a halt. Girls emphasized that it was rare for male peers to intervene as they appear to enjoy and encourage the situation, although older boys at a senior level were said to step in occasionally and break it up.

### Intervening in fights

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated that they had tried to stop a fight in the last year.

- 37.1% of students (1269 students; 54.7% of girls and 19.6% of boys) have tried to stop girls fighting.
- 38.6% of students (1323 students; 24.8% of girls and 52.3% of boys) have tried to stop boys fighting.

### Intimate partner violence

Several girls spoke about their experience of being in a heterosexual relationship where their intimate partner was violent towards them. Although these girls were only teenagers, the behaviours of the partner emulated the power and control tactics of family violence, such as checking her phone messages, telling her how to dress, limiting her contact with friends and being physically aggressive or violent towards her when jealous. Sometimes a male partner was considerably older than the girl, but not always. Interestingly, when asked if their partner's behaviour was possessive, these girls referred to it as protective. One girl described her reason for staying with her violent partner was because she really loved him and she worried what would happen to him if she left. Another stayed because he was her supplier and she feared being on her own. Yet, another stayed because she was trapped in the social networks that they shared and everyone else thought they were meant for each other. Sometimes through their partners' girls found themselves in a culture of violence that involved them in



criminal activity. The experiences of these girls are a reminder that they too are part of the cycle of violence.

*I wouldn't say possessive. He can be a little bit controlling. Emma, 18, #68*

### **Larger body**

Girls described how their female peers assumed they were fighters or tough girls because of their larger than average body size; apparently having more height or weight aligned with aggressive behaviour and fighting prowess. Assumptions led to labelling and these girls found themselves cast with a false reputation. While this could serve to deter altercations, it also presented these girls with challenges from those wanting to build a reputation. It was not uncommon for smaller girls to threaten their opponents with retaliation from the larger girls, falsely implicating them in the conflict. Similarly, girls wanting to avoid facing up to a challenge would approach the bigger girls and ask them to fight in their place. Larger girls found themselves sometimes falsely accused of being troublemakers.

*Everyone reckons that me and (name) would be good fighters because we are big, but we are soft and don't do things like that. Focus group comment*

*No one really wants to pick on me because of my height. Mia, 14, #85*

*People think that I'm scary coz I'm big but really like deep down I'm a softy, I'm a teddy bear, I'm nothing. Even the teachers think I'm a kind-hearted girl and not what they thought I was going to be when I came to this school. Coz they thought I'd cause trouble and start fights but no I didn't. Kerre, 15, #28*

*Because we are big and because we are (ethnicity) everyone expects us to be the tough girls and smash everyone. Focus group comment*

### **Media**

The influence of the media on girls' fighting was not a focus of the interviews and focus group discussions, however the topic did surface, and as such would be worthy of further investigation. Girls in their earlier teen years commented how many of their peers like to create drama in their lives so their felt noticed and important. They commented that girls thought their lives should mirror the excitement and emotions of television serials such as *Shortland Street*, *Desperate Housewives* and *Neighbours*. They believed girls imitated the mannerism displayed in the confrontations and emotional outbursts. They also commented that the clique culture of movies like *Mean Girls* was a reality of the school environment where girls divided themselves in to rival groups, setting the scene for clashes.

*Like celebrities and stuff and how they have pictures of them all dolled up and skinny and everything and then you see kids wearing the same clothes as they see in the magazines and then they actually do act like the celebrities. Coz I reckon the people that end up doing the fighting, to be honest is like one of those people, they're like really high up in the school. They think they're like top of the world. Angela, 17, #34*



In a similar way, girls spoke about the influence of violent role models featured in action games and videos. This raises concern as to the part this medium plays in teaching fighting skills and inciting altercations.

*I think that fighting and stuff on games, I reckon it's not that good. I don't sort of like it myself coz it maybe teaches girls that there is moves you can do, so they think in a next fight they can use those moves. And it probably gets girls angrier to want to fight coz you are fighting someone on the games and you just get so amped up. Sue, 16, #43*

### **Older boyfriends**

Girls reveal their experience of ongoing sexual relationships with males much older than themselves; gaps of five or six years between their ages was not uncommon. Younger girls, who had been involved with older boyfriends, tended to be more advanced in physical development and, in these cases, the age gap could be significant. A few girls had been misled by the male about his age, only to discover he was much older than they thought, in some cases over thirty years old. Although these girls were subject to the judgments and gossip of their female peers, the girls were flattered by the attention they received from older males and enticed by their experience, cars, access to alcohol and drugs and independent, carefree lifestyles. Without giving consideration as to why older males would want their company, girls would become infatuated. Young and naïve, these girls found themselves in unhealthy relationships where they were abused, manipulated and involved in their boyfriends' criminal activity. One girl gave up school to take on the caring 'wife' role, gave him access to her car and bank accounts and, surprisingly, the girls parents welcomed him into living arrangements in the family home. Thereby inadvertently trapping the girl in the relationship as a friendship formed between the adults of the household. As their relationship became violent so too did the violence in other aspects of the girl's life.

*Older dudes more mature and experienced. Guys our age: no jobs, no money. A 14-year old girl with an 18-year old guy is ok if they are happy. I know a 12 year old who went out with a 22-year old dude. Focus group comment*

*They dress up to look cool, short dresses that look skanky. Older guys were following them, they were so drunk at the (event). Violent behaviour goes along with skankiness. Focus group comment*

*He had a car, had access to alcohol. He could get me smokes. He could get me drugs. Gina, 16, #47*

*I was actually quite scared of him (boy, 19-years old). I thought that if I did something wrong he'd leave me or maybe hit me. Coz I cared about him so much and I thought I loved him but I was too scared of him. Meg, 14, #81*

### Maree's Story

At 20 Mike was five years older than Maree, and he won her heart with his sad story. He had grown up in an abusive family, lost his mum to an addiction and found himself living on the streets in his early teens. Without a job, Maree helped fill his days. She started wagging school to spend time with him, and didn't bother to answer her mates' calls. He was a troubled young man and Maree was doing everything she could to get him off drugs, to stop fighting and committing burglaries. The last thing she wanted was Mike to go to jail. She told Mike's story to her father and when Mike's rent money ran out, he moved in with Maree's family. Mike and Maree's Dad became the best of mates. They shared a love of beer, rugby and tinkering about in the shed. Maree's mother was less accepting, but she did not challenge her husband's decisions. Maree was devoted to Mike and would do anything and everything to help him and to please him. She even quit school to be with him more. He drove her car, used her bankcard and took over her life. He also physically abused her. The day finally came and she found the strength to end the relationship but being Dad's friend, Mike came to the house daily. One day Dad was not home and Mike pulled a knife on Maree threatening her not to leave him. Maree finally told her father the truth and they put protection orders in place. With Mike gone, Maree is trying to get her life back on track. "I was dumb and I thought he was the guy that I was going to be with forever". Maree is now returning to school and trying to reestablish friendships with her mates.

### Police intervention

Girls of this study held a wide range of opinions and thoughts about the police officers they had contact with, as well as the interventions they had experienced. Girls spoke sincerely about the 'good ones', who showed them respect and listened to their side of the story. Several talked about the officers who offered them kindness and compassion in difficult situations. They liked those who would chat with them about how life was going or give them a friendly smile when they passed on the street. One young woman recalled how it was a police officer who had been there for her at a time of deep sorrow, when she was all alone. Then there were girls who complained about the way the police physically handled them. One girl described being pinned by her throat against a wall, another complained about being shoved to her knees and sworn at. Yet while the police were not their favourite, others acknowledged that they were just doing their job, although it was a nuisance.

*I don't like on the weekends if we're driving around and they pull us up or whatever. I'm like 'Oh my God here they go again'. I don't really like them but I know they're only doing good...They're annoying but when we usually get pulled up it might be for like something like the light isn't working or something like that...I don't have a car but when I'm with other people it's just real annoying getting pulled up all the time and then the drivers get fines all the time for not being on their licence, having a full car and they're still on their restricted or something. Cee, 16, #24*

Girls claimed that the police ineffectively dealt with girl fighting. They complained about slow response, lack of follow through and failure to take girl fighting seriously. There was also a sense that girls would not be held accountable for their actions and

could easily manipulate the situation to shift responsibility. Some girls admitted their intention to do their 'crimes' while young so not to get into serious trouble.

*I think the police don't follow up enough. Definitely, coz they think I think the police think that girls are weak, so they can't hurt each other as much as guys can. Mere, 16, #19*

*These days the cops can't really do anything unless they see the fight really, because they (the other girl) just makes up bullshit and it never gets solved and then you're left with nothing. You can't get in trouble for it if you say something different so they can't get you for it anyway, unless the person's got a broken whatever. Sarah, 16, #83*

Believing police involvement would be ineffective was a reason girls did not turn to the police to help sort out their problems with other girls. However, being labelled a 'nark' or an informant was a key reason girls stayed away from the police. Girls worried about the reaction they would receive from their peers if they went to the police. Considering that friendships among girls are very fluid, fallout from such an act could impinge on future social interactions, especially if parents got involved.

*Why wouldn't I do it because I wouldn't want to be called the nark, if you did you probably wouldn't have no friends coz they'd know you as the nark and wouldn't want to trust you again maybe you would get a hiding yourself for going to nark on the person. Go to the police, no definitely not, because some people's parents don't like police going around to their doorstep and stuff like that so I wouldn't want to do it and that would make my friends get in even more trouble from their parents. So if you just kept it quiet then no one would have to know about it. Sue, 16, #43*

Getting in trouble with the police or getting arrested seemed to make more of an impression with older girls, who realise the future implications.

*I've learnt my lesson, Yeah getting arrested I don't want to go through that again. She did a runner down the road after I beat her up and I went down the road with the knife to find her but I couldn't find her so I went back and got a chair and smashed her car window...Went inside threw everything around and ripped her cupboards off and then was walking down the road and the cops came and arrested me. Pip, 18, #26*

However, some of the girls who did come to the attention of the police and ended up in an intervention appeared to fail to recognise the seriousness of their actions or their situation. Nor did they fully comprehend the legal implications or the police/court procedures they were to follow. Some retorted to the threat of police action with bravado, while several spoke about the ease of getting around community service because those responsible were lenient or easily swayed.

*(Police) gave me a warning. Community service? Nah I didn't do it, they give me community service all the time but I'm like 'nah'. I've pretty much got the cops here wrapped around my little finger. They say they're gonna put me in Youth Prison and I just go 'Do it then', and they don't. Jude, 13, #29*

Girls described family meetings or family group conferences as being a charade where girls said what they thought authorities wanted to hear so they could get through the procedure as quick as possible. Girls also said that sometimes family or peers instructed them what to say to obscure responsibility or limit the issue from progressing further into other family matters, such as illegal activity or family violence. Because of this, such meetings did little to end the dispute between girls, which then had the potential of igniting again.

*How did you feel about the family group conference? I was frustrated seeing her, because she was lying, like I went in with an attitude where I was gonna tell the truth and I wanted to sort it all out...She just went in there and lied and lied and then she wrote a letter and she's like 'I'm stronger than you think you'll never hurt me'...The day after we had the family group conference I heard that she was telling people personal stuff that got told at that meeting. So that really pissed me off again. Mere, 16, #19*

On one occasion, the inadvertent comment given by a police officer had the opposite desired effect and ended up bolstering the egos of several young girls who were labelled 'the most criminal' of the area.

*The police said we are the most criminal in (place). We are the two most criminal girls in (place)...Yeah the police said that I was the Queen, I was like the leader. Nat, 16, #62*

All such instances contributed to police intervention as being viewed by many girls as ineffective or even an amusement.

### **Pregnancy**

When a girl announced she was pregnant, she became central to her mates who focused on protecting her. Their loyalty became critical as fights between girls did not stop just because of pregnancy, and so it became the role of her mates to ward off any threats or challenges. During the course of the interviews, this was observed, when a girl in her mid teens publically announced she was two weeks pregnant (not confirmed). Her status within the group was elevated and her friend network tightened. Her best mate stepped in and fought on her behalf.

However several girls who were well on in their pregnancy at the time of their interview or focus group spoke about fighting during their early months, becoming less inclined to be involved in their last trimester.

### **Provoked by boyfriends**

Girls described how boys manipulated girl fights by purposely cheating on their girl friend and then deliberately revealing it or boasting to their girlfriend about being pursued by other girls. The girls explained that boys did this so the girls would fight over them, because, as many girls said, "boys think girl fighting is hot to watch." Girl fighting in these situations was an act of retaliation to save face.

*My boyfriend set me up with heaps of fights. I'd go who's the bitch this time and he was like it was fucken (girl's name) and I was like 'Ok' and went out and had a*

*fight with her, they (boyfriend) videoed it and put it on YouTube. He didn't cheat on me though; it was just a set up. Jude, 13, #29*

*My boyfriend is always like 'scrap her out then' and I'm like 'nah' and he's like 'go on'...Like someone's there at his house that I don't like I'll be like a bitch, I hate her and stuff...He'll be like well go scream at them then, I want to see a fight. Dale, 15, # 1*

While girls said they felt anger at their boyfriends for his infidelity, they verbally and physically retaliated against the other girl. As stated earlier in this report, these girls took their anger out against the other girl because she violated the unwritten rules that girls should not go after another girl's boyfriend. Girls also explained retaliation was directed at the other girl because she was perceived as a more feasible target since boys were considered harder to punish. Another reason some girls gave for deciding to fight the other girl instead of the boyfriend, was their concern for further damaging any chance of rekindling the romantic relationship.

*Boys cause a lot of problems, they are players, they use you. They're meant to be with you then they will be with someone else at the same time. They don't tell you themselves, like they just let you find out. They never admit to it. Then you take it out on the girl coz you think it is the girl's fault. Take it out on the girl coz there is nothing you can do to the guy but you have a chance at hurting the girl. Focus group comment*

### **Racism**

The commonality of racism was an apparent theme throughout the interviews and focus groups. Often girls were oblivious to the fact that their comments were racist. Racist statements and comments were based on stereotypes and prejudice. Most girls of minority ethnicity complained of experiencing racism, which was directed at them from peers, both male and female New Zealand European.

Racist attitudes frequently contained assumptions that particular ethnicities were predisposed to violent behaviour. This extended beyond Maori and Pacific Island girls to include girls of other ethnicities who had dark complexions. As mentioned earlier in this report, girls asked other girls to fight their battles, and generally it was girls with dark complexions who were approached for this purpose as they were thought to be fighters or tough girls.

*I think this is quite racist but Maori people are bought up a lot different to Pakeha and the Maori people don't really have boundaries, coz most of them acknowledge fighting as being the strongest out there and they kind of allow it. I just think that Pakeha girls know that violence is not OK whereas Maori don't. New Zealand European girl, 16*

*If they said I'm weak or that I'm a slut which they have done, I'll probably end up smacking them or I'd walk away. Why the different response? I try to stay on the good side of the Maori people so I'd walk away from them, but if it's a white person saying it to me I'll be like whatever. Why on the good side of the Maori? Coz sometimes they're scary. New Zealand European girl, 13,*

*All my life there has been someone big and black and they are scary. New Zealand European girl, 17*

Relational aggression frequently contained racist slurs, which if not directed at the girl, targeted her family members or close associates. These girls spoke of receiving cruel comments and being the brunt of insensitive jokes. Offended, hurt and angered, they defended against this racism with retorts that intensified the relational aggression delivered by both parties. The outcome was often retaliation in the form of a verbal or physical fighting. Friends of the dominant culture sometimes defended girls from a minority ethnicity, who chose not to retaliate. Alternatively some girls from a minority ethnicity disengaged from situations where they experienced or felt targeted because of their ethnicity. In some cases this meant they opted out of the school environment or social programmes and linked with peers sharing similar experiences.

*A lot of people coz of my colour, expect me to fight but that's just not me. I wouldn't hurt a fly. New Zealand non-European girl, Focus group comment*

*I actually left school on my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. I'd catch a bus every morning and night and there was this one guy on the bus who just gave me shit every single day and I couldn't handle it, like racist stuff. I thought right I've had enough so I smacked him in the face and never went back to school. That was the final straw. New Zealand non-European girl, 18, #68*

### **School intervention**

Girls appreciated school staff who gave them extra consideration, or went out of their way to be fair and respectful. These individuals made a positive impact in girls' lives and were spoken of with admiration and appreciation. Similarly there were teachers who girls valued the opportunity to learn from. There appeared to be a greater ease for girls to engage individually with school staff than in the classroom setting or in front of their peers.

*I respect (name) and them type of teachers that are real good to me but then there's (name) who seems to have favourites and they are real rude to me so I just don't get along with them so they say something I'll just say something back. Dale, 15, # 1*

Girls described some classroom environments as bedlam, where students came and left at will, relational aggression between students was continual and physical aggression commonplace. For some girls the classroom became the arena to build or maintain their reputations. With a captured audience of students, they would perform an ongoing duel with the teacher with the goal redirecting attention to themselves. Alternatively they would spar against other students. Girls who were serious about learning particular material found the situation distracting and frustrating. Interestingly, the researchers had the experience of being thanked by teaching staff for holding the interviews and focus groups because the absence of key girls meant that teachers could get on with their lessons. Girls complained about teachers, particularly the young or less experienced ones, lacking the skills or confidence to cope with disruptive students.

*They can't teach, they can't do anything. Stand up for each other. When someone is picking on a teacher, they just let it go they won't punish them or anything. (Name), they were my favourite teachers, they did what they could but I think some of them are just too young to come and work here. Pip, 18, #26*

Although girls often bragged about their antics to disrupt a classroom or unsettle a teacher, during the interview they also spoke about how their behaviour was managed by the teacher. Girls complained that teachers reacted on assumptions or partial observations and failed to comprehend the complete circumstances. They argued that the accounts of those witnessing should be taken into consideration.

*School teachers intervene without hearing the full story and give blame to the wrong person. Teachers need to listen more to people. They tell us not to accuse people and then they go and do that. They need to ask those that witnessed it too. Focus group comment.*

Girls were also quick to petition for discipline to be consistent and objected to preferential treatment, which was deemed unfair and highly unacceptable from those in a position of authority.

*Seems boys can do whatever but as soon as a girl does something they are referred. Dale, 15, # 1*

Girls advocated for schools to do more towards addressing conflict between girls. Definite rules, clearer reporting systems, firmer discipline and consistent follow through by school management were reoccurring themes. It was not adequate to just remove a girl from the school, she needed to be supported to change or else she would return or move to another school and the problems would continue. Girls also said that they needed to learn how to stay neutral when others were fighting and how to effectively respond to antagonism.

*They should be like, here at school, if you get in a fight you're stood down yet if you get in a fight they go around and they'd be like don't do it again. Whereas I think if you get in a fight you should be kicked out of school... They really need to have something more, someone will get in a fight and then they (authorities) go 'oh you are stood down'. Then they'll come back to school and they've had nothing to help them realise why it's bad. Dale, 15, #1*

*Lots of people say this school is not good when it comes to bullying and all that stuff coz they don't do much about it. They just like punish you...Just like teach people more about it and stuff coz no one really knows what we should do. Like should we go to the Dean and stuff. Jo, 15, #33*

*What school could do is teach girls not to take sides. Focus group comment*

Yet even when school staff applied their best efforts to address a girl's behaviour, parents could undermine it by not recognising the significance of the girl's infraction nor supporting the process of the school's conduct procedures. Such trivialization reduced the authority of the education system making it difficult for the school to



maintain a mutually respectful relationship with the girl or her family. This resulted in the girl losing out on her education.

*I got stood down for swearing at a teacher. ... I'll be like 'Oh yeah', there's five minutes to the end, I grab my stuff and I'll leave coz I do that to all my classes coz they get too boring and I hate waiting for the bell. And then teachers go 'Oh where are you going' and I'll be like 'Oh I'm leaving', and then I was like 'Fuck you', and they say 'Get back in here' and I was like 'No, fuck you', so I walked out and I was like 'You ugly bitch'... Then they sent me home... How was your Mum about that? Oh, nah my Mum didn't care, not really. Coz I already told her the whole situation and stuff. 'Mum I'm not having a good day' and she was like 'Why's that', 'I swore at a teacher and I was like 'Fuck you bitch I'm leaving and then she wouldn't let me go' and my Mum was like 'yeah, OK', and I was like 'I'll probably get stood down for term one' and then she's like 'yeah, OK'. And then the (school staff) was like 'Oh I'll make sure your Mum's got a lot of work for you to do' and I was like 'Yeah, my Mum would probably make me do something' and all I had to do was hang out the washing and wash the dishes and that was my day and I had two days stood down and it was on a Monday and I never went for the rest of the week. Enya, 15, #45*

Girls, who had participated in their schools' intervention programmes, as part of a disciplinary action or a peer support programme, did so with little sincerity. Many described going through the motions to meet the requirements that would allow them to return to school, or "get teachers off their back". Their experiences did little to resolve the tension in their relationships with other girls.

*I had to have a restorative justice meeting with her. Well we had to discuss it before we did it. I told them that I don't want to say 'sorry' coz I'm lying if I do coz I wasn't sorry for what I did. She deserved it. What did you say at the meeting? I was just like 'sorry I hit you.' Did you mean it? No, got me back into school. Carla, 14, #110*

*I had to do mediation once. It didn't work. We didn't like her boyfriend and we weren't talking to her and she put us in the (mediation room) to talk with her and stuff and we got in there we're like 'why did you bring us here' and she didn't even talk, like we were sitting there for twenty minutes and she wasn't saying anything and we were like 'this is just a waste of time' and then she started crying and we were like 'Why are we even here' and she was like coz we need to sort this stuff out, and we were like 'But your not even talking'. I don't know we just left. Didn't change anything. Jo, 15, #33*

*Yeah, so the next day I got pulled out of my class and we had to go over there and say sorry and stuff and it's actually quite hard to say sorry. It's quite hard to be in the same room as them coz they look like they're trying to be funny or something or they're trying to prove something like that. But it was actually really hard for me to look them in the eye and say I'm sorry coz really I wasn't. Sue, 16, #43*

While the interviews mainly focused on girls' involvement in conflict, some girls gave reasons why they would not choose to fight. Girls were deterred from anti-social



behaviour and violence when they knew it would not be tolerated and they understood that inappropriate behaviour would be addressed with consequences. Girls were further deterred if they appreciated that these consequences could involve the restriction of privileges or activities of which they valued or enjoyed. Girls were further dissuaded from engaging in anti-social behaviour when they feared censure from both school and parents.

*One time before netball we were like warming up and she like kicking the ball and I told her not to and we got into this like big argument and then she spat on me and then I was real close to hitting her except then I didn't coz I knew I wouldn't be able to play netball. Teena, 16, #16*

*I was gonna dong her one. Why didn't you? Because I don't want to get suspended from school. Olli, 15, #35*

*Depends on what the situation is, if it was like all of a sudden somebody came up and just smashed me, hit me over, then my first reaction would be to hit them back but if it was just like somebody annoyed me I'd probably think "Well I probably don't want to get in a fight with them because I probably get in more trouble". Like if I had time to think about it I would but if somebody is all of a sudden I wouldn't. Olli, 15, #35*

#### **Reporting violence and anti-social behaviour**

Similar to the comments made in the earlier police section, girls described their reluctance to report violence and anti-social behaviour to school staff. They identified several reasons for this. Many were concerned that peers would label them a 'nark' or 'tattle tale', therefore they tried to resolve their clashes without involvement from adults. Others did not trust that the school would address the situation, or even worse, that the school's involvement would not fully resolve the problems and the remaining tension would incite further friction. A point to be noted here is that because of the complexity of the conflict between girls, which is often played out over time and implicates a number of individuals, girls themselves sometimes could not accurately supply details of a problem, its origin or associated dynamics. This would hinder how information was relayed to authorities and then impact on their ability to address the matter in a comprehensive way.

While many girls spoke of having good rapport with guidance staff, they were less inclined to approach individual teachers or senior staff, fearing that the issue might be blown out of proportion, or that their involvement might result in disciplinary actions. Girls with a history of transgressions thought that they would not be taken seriously, or assumed to be the responsible party. Other girls felt that the school would not respond fairly because of their reputation, ethnicity or family history.

*I was thinking of going to a student counsellor but am too chicken to. Female, 13, Questionnaire comment*

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### Reporting relational aggression

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated that in the last year they had sometimes or often reported relational aggression behaviour to an adult.

- Of the 3216 students who had experienced relational aggression, cyber bullying or physical aggression, 40.6% of students (1306 students; 45.5% of girls and 36.0% of boys) had reported the behaviour to an adult, such as their parent or a teacher. Note: this does not include verbal or physical fighting.
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### Self harm

Often many girls who were violent or anti-social to others, described how at some point in their lives, they had been subjected to similar or worse treatment. Amongst these girls, were those who at times chose to turn their violence inward as a way of managing their anger. Girls displayed scars from cutting themselves, the most common form of self harm encountered in this study and they also spoke of inflicting burns, battering themselves, drug overdoses and suicide attempts. Some of the most reputed tough girls shared that they too had had their quiet moments of self-harming.

*It like gets rid of some shit that I have to deal with and it makes me forget everything sometimes, coz I just focus on the physical pain instead. Jude, 13, #29*

*Coz like I caught the dark spot where I was in real self-harm and suicidal and I just wanted to get away from everything. Yeah my Mum actually walked in and tackled me to the ground to get the rope off my neck...It's the parents splitting up; the violence in my life and my brother assaulted me. Kina, 13, #36*

*Coz cutting is a serious thing. I should know as I have scars over my legs and teens need to be better informed about self-harm. Female, 14, Questionnaire comment*

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### Experience of Self-harm

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated their experience, in the last year, of harming themselves because they were emotionally or physically hurt by another person or because they were angry at another person.

- 23.4% of **all** students or 802 students (29.5% of **girls** and 17.4% of **boys**) report that they have self harmed in the past year because of any of the reasons stated above.

### Self-harm and peer related violence

Of the 97.6% of all students or 3343 who indicated their involvement in a climate of peer related violence:

- 20.3% or 679 indicated they had harmed themselves because their feelings were hurt by another person;
- 8.8% or 295 indicated they had harmed themselves because they were physically hurt by another person;
- 14.5% or 486 indicated they had harmed themselves because they were so angry at another person.

#### Jude's story

Jude is 13 and she started drinking alcohol when she was eight. Her uncles supplied the alcohol. She started smoking then too. This was a year after she was first raped. The man who raped her was a friend of the family and her uncles took care of him. "Made him bite the kerb and stood on his head", she remembers the fight, after all it was only five years ago. She was raped again at 12 and just recently, both times she was drunk. She continues to drink herself into a stupor on a regular basis. "Coz it's like cutting my wrists, my wrists give me a rush and when you drink I just forget about everything." The main thing she is trying to forget are the guys who assaulted her. Jude's life is at the centre of local gossip and a few months back she put a girl in hospital because she spoke bad of Jude's family. But life is better now, Jude has a new boyfriend and they are going to get married when she is 21. She is also back in school and more focused on her work: "I only drink before school and after school".

#### Sex abuse history

It is well documented in New Zealand that 1 in 4 females have been victims of sexual violation and both international and national research acknowledges that many females who end up in the justice system have also been survivors of sexual violation. During their interviews, many girls spoke about their unwanted sexual experiences. The girls' quotes scattered throughout this report provide the evidence. A girls' reputation for violence almost always paralleled her experience of sexual abuse. Some lost their childhood before they left primary school, others knew and loved the perpetrator, and when they spoke of rape it was not one instance but multiple. These unwanted encounters were not rare and, for some girls, they were ongoing. These girls were referred to appropriate services.

*I have been raped twice. The one was at six or seven and the other one was at ten but it was from different people. Yeah the first one was my Dad and the second one was the nephew one of my Mum's boyfriends at the time...Like the last boyfriend, he'd texted me at night saying 'I'm going to the bathroom can you meet me there in five minutes' or something like that...I got taken off my Mum.*

Lori, 16, #49

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### Forced sex

The following responses are from the questionnaires and are based upon Year 9 and 10 students who indicated, in the last year, their experience of being forced or tricked into sexual behaviour that they did not like, by an adult or teenager.

- 7.6% of **all** students (260 students; 11.4% of girls and 3.8% of boys) report that they have been forced or tricked into sexual behaviour by an adult or teenager.
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### Stress

Girls described their lives as stressful and they complained of the difficulty of coping with school, work, and social activities while trying to deal with pressures at home. Those girls who were prone to aggression took out their frustration on other girls, teachers and anyone who got in their way. Alcohol and drugs, particularly marijuana, were also used to reduce tension in their lives. Some turned it inward through self-harm, eating disorders and depression. If they were at school, some took their problems to a guidance counsellor, but this was not an option for all. During the course of the interviews it became apparent that life for many of these girls was not easy, and how another upset or challenge could make them retreat into anti-social or violent behaviour.

*I'm not a person who doesn't react. I'll always react. It's probably worse right now like dealing with everything, when I get older it'll get better I reckon. Just like peer pressure, um trying to look cool and be cool and fit in and just stuff like that really coz you are just so stressed and trying to deal with everything. Emily, 12.5, #17*

*Sometimes I just get this, specially if it's been boiling up for a while like tension at home and stuff and I just want to hit something or break something...I've grown up quite fast and now I'm gonna get a full time job and I think I'm starting to feel so much pressure, like everyone is looking at me and I have to shine....I always have to look perfect and I'd be stressed out...I get all down in the dumps coz I thought no one liked me and no guys thought I was pretty. Mere, 16, #19*

*You don't have very many worries when you're drunk. You like forget about things at home. Sometimes it's just for fun but sometimes you do it for stress release. Tasha, 14, #18*

## CONCLUSION

This report is based on the findings from The Girl's Project, a two-year investigation of girls' use of violence and anti-social behaviour, which was conducted in the Tasman Police District between August 2009 and August 2011. As mentioned at the beginning of this report, the information presented here is the culmination of several methods of data collection, which have allowed the triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative analysis, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings.

To obtain a comprehensive understanding of girls' use of violence and anti-social behaviour, the research took a funnel approach beginning with an overview of youth then proceeding to concentrate on the girls of most concern. Over 3400 questionnaires, collected from Year 9 and 10 boys and girls, have helped gauge the involvement of young people and facilitated an appreciation of gender differences. Their responses reflect views of those attending a wide range of schools of varying deciles including state and religious, single-sex and coed, urban and provincial, and alternative and home school situations. In addition, conversations with 40 focus groups of girls, between the ages of 12 to 18, have shed light across a broader sample of 'ordinary' young women from mainstream settings. However, this report makes its most significant contribution through the sharing of the perspectives held by over 100 teenage girls, many of whom engaged in violent behaviour and became involved in the research through their connection with authorities.

Geographically, this research was specific to the Tasman Police District, a very large jurisdiction that stretches across the top of the South Island from Kaikoura to Golden Bay and down the West Coast. It is an area renowned for its picturesque vistas, more than its violence amongst girls, which many would assume would be a far cry from the events of an inner city. Yet here, emulating other locations that have been highly profiled in the media, girls engage in violent and anti-social behaviour. While the research was never intended to be a representative sample of New Zealand, it does support the theory that if the Tasman District shares similar experiences as inner city locations, the issues associated with girls' violence and anti-social behaviour should be considered a nationwide phenomenon. As a result, the information contained in this report will have relevance for many services involved with the welfare of young women.

This report records the findings from an exploration of teenage girls' involvement with violent and anti-social behaviour. It focuses on this phenomenon and for that reason it does not separate girls by demographic variables, although it includes this diversity. This is to eliminate the possibility of unfounded comparisons or premature conclusions that would reach beyond the scope of this study. However, it is believed that the information contained in this report will help to generate future studies, which will be able to appropriately investigate the demographic divisions within the New Zealand population.

In writing this report the thought is constantly present that many of its readers will be looking for 'the answer' to 'the problem' of girls' violence. Nothing is ever that simple. However the research has provided several key considerations that when aptly applied will progress the way we work with girls' violent and anti-social behaviour. It is the intention of Stopping Violence Services Nelson and the Principal Researcher, Dr Donna

Swift, to present workshops in the near future that will further enhance the practical application of this material.

### **Key considerations**

Girls' violence and anti-social behaviour is best understood as existing upon a continuum of precursory actions that increase with intensity. The quantitative findings indicated that a climate of violence exists amongst adolescent youth, both a male and female, whereby relational aggression, including sexual harassment and racial harassment, is commonplace and viewed as normalised behaviour amongst the majority of young people. Combined with the ease of technology, relational aggression has flourished. This behaviour tends to be indirect and parades as a joke or entertainment amongst peers. For most girls, this is as far as it goes, notwithstanding that many will outgrow this behaviour while others will become very proficient at inflicting misery. It is important that we pause at this point and acknowledge the normalising of violence in our society and that it is this acceptance that underpins girls' use of violence and anti-social behaviour.

Only some girls choose to augment their relational aggression with more direct confrontational behaviour. To include direct physical intimidation, such as a menacing shove, or a verbal challenge, such as a face-to-face 'have a go', is to strengthen the point being made or signal a warning for the other person back down. The intensity of the situation is often determined by the composition of the audience, who play a significant role in inciting the fervour of the altercation and encouraging those involved. The intensity also reflects the purpose the altercation holds for the personal interests of the girls involved. It is at this point that interaction escalates into a physically violent fight. While a girl's decision to proceed to this level is charged with emotion, it is also weighted with more meaning than what is apparent at the immediate moment. The decision to throw that first punch has been shaped by many factors including her history, her peers, her reputation, her family influences.

Girls describe relational aggression along with the incitement of physical violence, as being most prevalent during the early years of high school, after being established with increasing frequency and intensity through the primary and intermediate years. At the ages of 14 or 15, during the mid high school years, many girls become focused on school based activities, their social network becomes consistent and they have more confidence and personal security, as a result violent and anti-social behaviour appears to dissipate and has a less significant impact. However, for girls where this is lacking, violent and anti-social behaviour continues and manifests in other aspects of their lives. As a consequence, girls whose behaviour operates at the further reaches of the continuum described above tend to direct their violent and anti-social behaviour further afield and more frequently.

This understanding highlights several windows of opportunity where prevention and intervention should be targeted. Essentially, curbing the onset of relational aggression is a primary prevention strategy, followed by addressing rivalry and competition that surfaces along side the insecurities of puberty and the social upheaval of changing schools or commencing high school. This is a pivotal time where a girl's history, home

life and social world collide; as a result our prevention efforts are most imperative if the intensification of violent and anti-social behaviour is to be thwarted.

Addressing the conduct of a girl entrenched in violent and anti-social behaviour adds significant layers of complexity to our intervention practice. It is essential that we recognise that this behaviour serves a vital purpose for the girl. It has been her means of external recognition and self-validation. It has also been her tool of survival that has been hardened by experience until it has become the habit of 'what you do'. In perfecting her skill, she has become wise beyond her years, attuned to any hint of deception, and sceptical of any unconditional offer. For her to cease this behaviour requires that a strategy of intervention offers an exchange of equal or superior benefit and that it be an alternative she can rely upon.

A strategy of intervention must also address the quantity and the complexity of the issues of concern in her life. Each one is an obstacle to her change and without a concerted effort there are ongoing stumbling blocks of frustration. Nor can a strategy of intervention expect a girl to change in isolation. The world that surrounds her must also change so it can support her new behaviour and reinforce the non-violence message. This then requires a holistic approach that involves those who are significant in her life, her school and her community.

Any strategy of intervention must also remember that this girl is a child. She may have life experiences that surpass many adults, she may dress in clothes that make her appear much older, she may be able to drink her older peers under the table, but she is a child. Her brain has not fully matured, her body has not finished developing and as much as she thinks she is an independent soul, she needs care and guidance from those who have her best interests at heart. This girl needs to connect to a safe, stable environment where she can blossom socially, intellectually and physically. Unfortunately for many girls of this study, family circumstances could not provide this.

School offers an alternative constant or point of stability for these girls. The emphasis is placed here on the need to acknowledge the default role schools and teachers now shoulder in the care and management of these girls in the absence of family ability or interest. So often when girls are removed or remove themselves from the school environment they become lost. Without other solid connections in her life, a girl is apt to aimlessly drift, vulnerable to negative influences. Therefore it is important that intervention foster connection, particularly through education, which will eventually open doors of opportunity for her. Removing a girl from a classroom is a way to shut down her bad behaviour, removing a girl from a school is a way to shut down her life.

The findings of this research highlight the need for New Zealand to follow international prevention and intervention strategies. These use a gender specific, gender responsive and trauma informed approach to address girls' use of violence and anti-social behaviour. This means programmes must be designed specifically for our girls and young women. The content, facilities and staffing must respond to their gendered reality and must acknowledge the impact gendered violence and oppression has for all females.

There is no 'quick fix' to girls' use of violence and anti-social behaviour. It is short-sighted and superficial to think otherwise but there is good reason to begin prevention and intervention as soon as possible. We need to be mindful that prevention is money

well spent if it means keeping a girl in school and giving her a fulfilling future, and intervention is money well spent if it keeps a girl out of our courts and prison system.

It is important that we do not lose sight of the fact that most young women never become involved in violent offending. But those who do also have the strong possibility of engaging in other criminal behaviour and they may endanger their health and mental wellbeing with drugs and alcohol. There is the very real potential that they will enter into a violent relationship, have an unplanned pregnancy and become the mother of our next generation. The cycle begins again. Addressing girls' violence is paramount to stopping the cycle of family violence in New Zealand.



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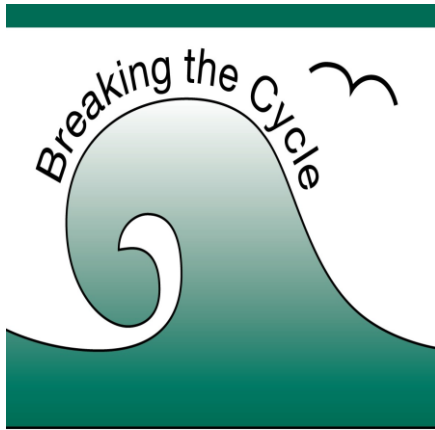
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## Girls' violent and anti-social behaviour

Want to learn more?



Stopping Violence Services Nelson  
Te Kupenga Whakaoti Mahi Patunga

**Research findings:** On August 5<sup>th</sup> 2011, Stopping Violence Services Nelson and Dr Donna Swift will launch the findings from *The Girls' Project*, a 2-year investigation of girls' violent and anti-social behaviour that has just been completed in the Tasman Police District. For a hard copy (\$20) or a PDF copy of the findings email: [admin@svsnn.org.nz](mailto:admin@svsnn.org.nz)

**Workshops:** As a result of this research, Stopping Violence Services Nelson will be offering industry specific training workshops led by Dr Donna Swift. Please indicate your interest by email [admin@svsnn.org.nz](mailto:admin@svsnn.org.nz) or ring Dee Cresswell, SVSN manager, 03 548 3850

Other exciting news!

a global voice  
for women

Soroptimist  International

Federation of the South West Pacific

**Community presentations:** Soroptimist International has adopted Dr Donna Swift's anti-violence campaign *Cliques, crews and catfights: Moving beyond girl violence* as their National Project for the next two years. This means that through their generous support, Dr Donna Swift is available at minimal cost to visit communities throughout New Zealand to talk about the challenges facing our girls. Through this arrangement she will deliver an evening presentation for parents and an afternoon discussion for professionals. If your community is interested contact Donna Kennedy, SI administrator, 03 5465469 or email [kennedy.w@xtra.co.nz](mailto:kennedy.w@xtra.co.nz)

**The possibility to extend *The Girls' Project* to include your girls:** Dr Donna Swift has been approached about extending her research, *The Girls' Project*, an investigation of girls' use of violence and anti-social behaviour, to include other regions and communities throughout New Zealand. If you are interested or wish to discuss her availability for speaking events, educational training or other research projects contact:

Dr Donna Swift

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