

THE MEDIA

The Age: lies, damned lies and statistics

DANNY SANDOR 'exposes' an engineered crisis.

At best, it was breathtakingly ignorant. At worst, it was a patently dishonest media 'beat-up'. Victorians woke up on Monday, 19 September 1995 to find that they were living in a 'gangland' where 'youth crime booms'. It was the front page story in Melbourne's *Age* newspaper. The story was dubbed an 'Exclusive'. Paul Conroy, the Law Reporter, was credited with the article but headlines and the final content are the province of sub-editors.

The product was a classic illustration of the media as a manufacturer of moral panic about young people,¹ and prompted a slightly different version of this article which was rejected for the regular 'Opinion' page of the *Age*. The episode therefore serves as a case study of the media's penchant for fashioning statistics to suit its ends and only publishing certain responses. This brief also critiques some well-intentioned professional responses that, probably unintentionally, did young people a disservice by accepting a selective set of statistics as a valid starting point.

The article

The lead paragraph of the *Age* story announced so-called 'new figures' about young people appearing before the Children's Court. It said that the statistics revealed a 'big jump in violent major crime and a huge increase in the number of children appearing in court'. The use of weapons and violence was said now to be 'more likely' when children commit 'major crimes'. The article was specific enough to inform that '[p]ractitioners believe that the increase in the number of offenders has placed Victoria's juvenile justice system under enormous pressure.' However, the sources of those beliefs remained anonymous.

Having started the article with such a heart-stopper introduction, much of the remainder attempted to divert the blame from young people themselves to resourcing of juvenile justice in Victoria. The hook was the recent resignation of Greg Levine from the position of Senior Magistrate of the Children's Court of Victoria. The reasons for Greg Levine's resignation had been the subject of wide speculation and the *Age* had been running the story for a couple of days. Greg Levine had placed on public record his dissatisfaction with current resourcing arrangements for the system and, in particular, the Court itself. The *Age* possibly thought it was doing something beneficial by attaching Greg Levine's concern about resources to figures that might be imaginatively linked to a sudden crisis.



You could work out from the article that of the rise in the number of children charged between 1990 and 1994 (3426), nearly half (1677) were constituted by those menaces to community safety who do not wear bicycle helmets or commit what are loosely termed 'transit offences'. Transit offences include failure to produce a valid ticket on request or failure to produce a valid concession entitlement. To have an idea of this index of children's booming dangerousness, readers should consider the difference over this time period for matters found proven — not merely charged — in relation to failure to produce a valid ticket on request: 1990, 197 children; 1994, 1287 children.

Interestingly, the more than six-fold rise coincided with certain State Government policies about a crackdown on fare evasion but also the staffing — or lack thereof — of public transport ticket outlets and a recent furore about fines being imposed in circumstances where purchase of a fare is impossible. That issue had been a running theme on the Peter Couchman ABC Radio program, the same program where, on the day of the headline, Peter Couchman uncritically accepted the validity of the article and its conclusions in an interview with Alan Kohler of the *Age* during their regular segment.

The responses

The Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, the peak non-government body representing young people and those who work with them, attempted to make a public reply to the article. It issued a press release the following day attacking the coverage as 'alarmist' and 'scaremongering'. The Council highlighted the greater amount and also greater relative increase in adult offenders for the categories reported in the *Age*. It questioned why figures available since early June had been branded 'new' in September and drew attention to the very small rise for children involved in the offences of causing serious injury intentionally (17 in 1990; 21 in 1994) or recklessly (9 in 1990; 13 in 1994). That offence category was contained in the same statistical report available from the State Government's Department of Justice but, conveniently for the headline, it was not included in the *Age* article.

There was no mention of the Council's criticisms on Tuesday in the *Age* or the other Victorian dailies so the press release was reissued with some additional comments. Wednesday's editions were silent on the subject save for the Letters to the Editor column of the *Age* — not quite a balance to the prominence of a front-page headline.

Jill Toovey from the Professional Development Centre of Monash University hurdled a critical analysis of the statistics to forge an explanation of the assumed truth of 'a disturbingly significant' increase in youth crime. Her explanation took aim at State Government educational policy. One might well agree that they are culprits of many things but they are not, hopefully, responsible for the selective reporting of statistics.

Professor Glen Bowes who is Director of the Centre for Adolescent Health was on the right track. His letter began from the footing that the headline was not borne out by the

figures and explained the increase with reference to the psychosocial context in which teenagers live. He viewed the 'worrying' increase in offending as a symptom of young people's 'growing wave of alienation and disillusionment'. I agree with his prescription of a 'real commitment to the next generation' but I am troubled by his diagnosis of the statistical signs.

Steve James from the Melbourne University Department of Criminology pointed to an obvious reason for increases in charge rates, namely changes in police practice with respect to the cautioning of children. Children who are cautioned do not appear at Court for the offence. If policing policy reduces the number of those cautioned, and it has by 13% according to Steve James who was drawing on Victoria Police statistics, it follows that more go through to Court, even if they are not found guilty. The statistics of who 'appears' at Children's Court, on which the *Age* article relied, are going to increase as a result. Add that to the almost 250% rise in transit offences reported in the *Age* article, and I think we can come out from behind the barricades.

The *Age* should, however, be given credit where it is due. The centrepiece table to represent increases in young people's offending was accurate to the extent that it actually dealt with proven offences, not merely appearances at court. Yes, the number of young people found to have offended did rise in the listed categories between 1990 and 1994. Did it justify the headline 'Gangland Victoria'? Not according to Professor Bowes nor Steve James who wrote:

But I like the evidence used to justify the wonderful title of 'Gangland Victoria': 'Senior police believe the increases may be due partly to a proliferation of gangs'. Now that's research! [emphasis in the original]

The editorial

Peddling the truth of its own fabrication, the *Age* then ran a pious editorial calling for 'more consultation' on the issue, saying there was 'a clear need for the Government to inquire into the reasons' behind the purported crime leap. Well, the Government needed to look no further than the unprofessional coverage of the statistics to solve the engineered crisis.

The editorial call 'to shore up or replace services that have been reduced or closed' was valid in its own right. There are many ways in which the availability, range and capacity of services to young people in Victoria warrant improvement in order to address young people's vulnerability to law breaking. Dramatic vilification of young people is a disreputable justification for mustering resources that are required anyway and distorting the statistical picture escalates unwarranted community fears — at a profit to the newspaper.

An editorial line that oozes with concern does not remedy a flawed representation of the data. Having created an unwarranted public perception of law and order under siege, the architects are kidding themselves if they think that their editorial call for resources will be the enduring memory of the issue for their readership. It is difficult to believe they care.

A different statistical conclusion

In case you still think children are the dangerous ones, have a look at *Table 1* juxtaposing the change over the same period in adult statistics for the offences listed by the *Age*. In each category, more adults are found guilty than children; not terribly surprising given the relative populations. Most damning of the *Age* article is that for four of the six categories cited in its article, the rate of adult increase is greater than for children.

What each category encompasses and how someone comes to be a statistic would take a whole separate article.² But one thing is clear: if 'assault in company' is the measure of gangland violence then adults outstrip children. Next headline — 'Grown-Up Gangs'? I don't think so.

Danny Sandor is a member of the Juvenile Justice Working Group of the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria.

References

1. See the discussion in ch.5 of White, R. *No Space of Their Own: Young People and Social Control in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, 1990. See also the paper by Stockwell, Charlotte, 'The Role of the Media in the Juvenile Justice Debate in Western Australia' in L. Atkinson and S.A. Gerull (eds), *National Conference on Juvenile Justice*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, 1993.
2. See White, R. and Alder, C. (eds), *The Police and Young People in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, 1994 and particularly the chapters by David Tait, 'Cautions and Appearances: Statistics About Youth and Police' and Ian O'Connor, 'Young People and Their Rights'.

Table 1. COMPARISON OF PROVEN OFFENCES
Children's Court statistics as reported in the *Age* (19.9.95) compared with Magistrates' Court statistics for adults (17 years and over) for 1990 and 1994

OFFENCE	ADULTS			CHILDREN		
	1990	1994	% inc.	1990	1994	% inc.
Intentionally cause injury	757	1627	115	89	169	90
Indecent assault	128	219	71	10	20	100
Robbery	39	108	177	40	63	58
Unlawful assault	796	1448	82	96	129	34
Assault in company	108	363	236	25	60	140
Assault police	1070	1173	10	29	42	45

Source of figures for 1990 and 1994: Children's Court Statistics and Magistrates' Courts Sentencing Statistics, Department of Justice Victoria (formerly Attorney-General's Department) 1990 and 1994.

PRISONS

Preventing HIV

MATTHEW GROVES reports on a trial program for the introduction of condoms into New South Wales prisons

In 1994 a group of 50 prisoners in several NSW prisons instituted an action which aimed to force the NSW Department of Corrective Services to reverse its long standing policy against the supply of condoms in prisons. The prisoners sought to challenge the Department's policy under various heads of public law. They also sought relief in negligence, making the argument that the Department's refusal to supply them with condoms constituted a breach of the duty of care it owed to the prisoners held in its custody. The claims in public law were rejected by Dunford J who held that the prisoners could not challenge a policy which had been formulated by the Commissioner for Corrective Services in conjunction with the relevant Minister. The