

The truth about begging

MEDIA RELEASE

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The PILCH Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic (**HPLC**) today launched new report calling for the offence of begging to be abolished.

People who beg tend to be among the most marginalised and isolated within society. Begging is usually a last resort activity for extremely poor people to supplement their minimal income and satisfy their basic needs.

The HPLC surveyed people begging in the Melbourne CBD and inner city area, which provided a stark example of the way in which poverty, homelessness, ill health and substance misuse intersect. The results of this survey include:

- **Income and employment:** 73% of participants were experiencing long-term unemployment. No participant listed any form of employment as their primary source of income. Instead, 26.92% of participants said that a disability support pension was their primary income, while the same number gave begging as their primary source of income.
- **Medical conditions:** 53.85% of participants suffered from mental illness, while 15.38% experienced physical disability and 11.54% suffered from intellectual disability.
- **Dependency:** 38.46% of respondents experienced drug dependency, and 15.38% experienced alcohol dependency; in addition, 15.38% experienced problem gambling.
- **Domestic violence:** 23.08% of participants had experienced domestic or family violence
- **Accommodation:** 50% of participants were sleeping rough at the time of the survey; the next most common forms of accommodation were men's shelters (15.38%), squats (11.54%) and rooming houses (11.54%).

'Clearly begging is a symptom of poverty,' said James Farrell, Manager/Principal Lawyer of the HPLC. 'The people we interviewed were experiencing extreme poverty and disadvantage, and begging is their last resort to allow them to access food, shelter, healthcare and other basic requirements'.

Chris Povey, Senior Lawyer with the HPLC, has called for the offence of begging to be abolished. 'Criminalising begging effectively criminalises poverty and annoying (or so-called 'anti-social') behaviours. This 'tough' approach has a deleterious effect on the Victorian community's culture of tolerance, respect and equality. This approach is also inconsistent with the Victorian Government's social policy action plan to address disadvantage and promote inclusion and participation.'

'A more effective means of discouraging begging would be to address its causes: alleviate the disadvantage of those who beg, and particularly address their need for food, shelter and health care,' said Mr Farrell.

The report is available at <http://www.pilch.org.au/wewantchange/>.

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