

Press Release – 24 June 2005

'We Want Change': Understanding and Responding to Begging in Melbourne

A major report released by the PILCH Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic today provides a new insight into the nature, extent and causes of begging and propose innovative public policy initiatives to respond to begging.

The report is based on in-depth interviews conducted with people observed begging in the streets of Melbourne earlier this year.

Key findings of the report include:

1. There are clear associations between begging, homelessness, poverty and mental illness. 94 per cent of people who beg are homeless, 65 per cent subsist on incomes below the Poverty Line, 71 per cent experience mental illness and 47 per cent report a drug or alcohol disorder.
2. There are also strong associations between begging and lack of access to services, with 94 per cent of people who beg being unable to find a bed in the homelessness service system, 30 per cent unable to access health care, and 18 per cent unable to receive any form of income support.
3. Begging is not particularly lucrative (the average take being \$5 to \$20 per hour), is considered demeaning and degrading and is generally a last resort income supplementation activity to meet immediate needs such as food, housing, health care and drugs.
4. There is no evidence that people beg in groups or gangs.
5. Most people beg by sitting in one place with a sign or approach people and ask for money. There is no evidence that 'aggressive begging' is widespread.
6. The most common law enforcement interventions in relation to begging involve 'moving people on' or charging them under the *Vagrancy Act*. People who beg are only referred to social services in 6 per cent of cases.
7. A 'zero tolerance' approach to begging is likely to result in the displacement of people who beg and a rise in other forms of illegal income supplementation activities such as theft.

The report, which will be launched at a forum supported by Urban Seed, Hanover Welfare Services and Melbourne Citymission, recommends a range of public policy responses to begging. Philip Lynch, Coordinator of the PILCH Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic, said that the responses are designed to implement the strong common public interest in reducing the incidence of begging in Melbourne: 'People who beg have the right to social inclusion and an adequate standard of living and the general public has the right to safe and amenable public places and cohesive communities' he said.

Key recommendations in the report include:

1. Victoria Police and the Victorian Government should collaborate with social services to develop well coordinated and resourced training programs, referral protocols and relationships. Social service responses are cheaper and more effective in addressing begging than criminalisation. Partnerships between police departments and homelessness services in Florida result in more than 750 successful referrals for assistance each year.
2. The Victorian Government should review, enhance and resource homelessness outreach services to more effectively engage with people who beg.
3. The Australian and Victorian Governments should substantially increase access and availability to crisis accommodation and supported housing, targeted health care for people who are homeless, and drug and alcohol treatment and services. The need for all of these services significantly exceeds supply. People with complex and multiple needs are the most vulnerable and likely to miss out.
4. The Australian Government should develop an integrated package of social security assistance to homeless people that includes access to health care, housing, employment assistance and personal support to ensure sustainable outcomes. An inadequate income is a strong predisposing condition to poverty and disadvantage.
5. Many people who beg want to work but face significant workforce participation barriers such as long-term unemployment and disabilities. Australian governments should enhance, resource and develop a range of vocational and employment schemes which aim to overcome participation barriers, provide holistic personal support in the areas of health, education and housing, and create sustainable employment opportunities for people who beg or are homeless. *The Big Issue* and the YP4 program are good examples of such schemes.

The report, entitled *We Want Change*, will be launched at 11.00am on Friday, 24 June 2005 at Credo Café (enter off Little Collins St via Baptist Place).

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