

Media Guide: Reporting on Homelessness

The Council to Homeless Persons is the peak body for homelessness in Victoria.

Who and what is homelessness?

Contrary to the stereotype of the man sleeping on a park bench, rough sleepers make up less than 5% of the homeless population.

Homelessness is when people don't have safe, secure and ongoing accommodation. The majority of people experiencing homelessness stay temporarily with friends or relatives ('couch surfing'), or in 'marginal housing' such as caravan parks, rooming houses or Government-funded supported accommodation. Over 40 per cent of people experiencing homelessness are under the age of 25 and the single biggest cause of homelessness in Australia is family violence.

Homelessness can affect anyone: families with children, young people, old people, single people, Indigenous people and people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

How many people are homeless in Australia?

On Census night 2011, 22,789 Victorians were counted as homeless and marginally housed.

Collecting data on homelessness is difficult because homeless populations fluctuate and many people move in and out of homelessness. In Australia, homelessness is measured via:

- the Census, which counts the number of people who are homeless at a specific point in time every five years;
- Government-funded homelessness support agencies, which count the number of people who access their services every year.

Things to consider when reporting homelessness

- Homelessness is not necessarily a long-term period in a person's life, and is not an inherent characteristic. It is preferable to refer to someone as '*experiencing homelessness*' rather than '*a homeless person*'.
- Is it necessary to mention if the person is homeless if the story has no direct relevance to homelessness (e.g. court reporting)? What impact could it have on their life? How does it enhance the story you are writing? Is their housing status important to the story; would you mention it if they were, say, renting?
- Homelessness is not a choice, and framing a story as such perpetuates damaging stereotypes, and can impact individuals personally. A shortage of



affordable housing, chronic generational poverty, plus experiences of violence and trauma can all contribute to a person's homelessness.

- Pejorative terms such as 'hobo', 'beggar', 'bum', 'dero', 'pan-handler' should be avoided.

Use of photos and imagery:

- Where possible use stock images that reflect the true diversity of homelessness, not just the stereotype; photos of people sleeping rough, or begging are appropriate if the story is about rough sleeping or begging
- When photographing 'case studies' consider the poses or settings. Asking someone to be photographed sitting in a laneway, or lying in the back of a car can be demoralising, and not appropriate if the person is no longer living in those circumstances.

Working with 'case studies':

We understand that incorporating a personal story can add an element of human interest, or illustrate a theoretical point. Consider the following:

- Understand the risks a person experiencing homelessness may take to speak with a journalist and give them an option to remain anonymous, not use their real name, be de-identified in photos or not to reveal their current place of residence, especially where family violence has been an issue.
- Does the person you are interviewing have a good enough grasp of the media to give their informed consent

to be interviewed? Don't presume that they know reach and potential audience of a newspaper or radio station or of an online article.

- Have you disclosed the nature or purpose of the article to the person you are interviewing, or the context that their story will be used?
- Reiterate to them that anything they say may be quoted, even if that sounds obvious as a journalist. Is it possible to re-read the person's quotes back to them?
- Don't suggest to an interviewee that they might be able to read/listen to the story before it goes to print/air if this is highly unlikely.
- Understand they may not be able to make or keep appointments. Perhaps deal with their support worker (if available / applicable) or organise a neutral meeting place.

A note on using children in media reports relating to homelessness

CHP strongly advocates against identifying children, either by name or photo, in the media, even if a parent agrees. Minors cannot give their informed consent, and the ramifications of appearing in the media both now, and into the future, are significant.