

MEDIA RELEASE 20 October 2016

Calls for begging to be decriminalised, as new research shows high levels of childhood trauma and mental illness amongst people begging in Melbourne

An alliance of seven welfare organisations are calling for begging to be decriminalised, asserting that using courts and police to respond to an issue of poverty has been ineffective in reducing begging, and only serves to entrench disadvantaged people in the justice system.

The '[Asking for change](#)' campaign launch coincides with the release of [research](#) by Justice Connect Homeless Law that shows a third of people who beg for money in Melbourne have experienced

who begs and why

In the last two years, Justice Connect Homeless Law has consulted with 30 people who beg or have begged.¹ The results showed:

 **77%** were experiencing homelessness²

had a mental illness **87%** 

 **77%** were experiencing drug or alcohol dependence

had been unemployed for 12 months or more **80%** 

 **33%** had experienced family violence

reported childhood trauma or abuse **37%** 

Image 1

1. Twenty-one people were cited represented by Homeless Law in the 2014 and 2015 Begging Cases at the Melbourne Magistrates' Court, after they were charged with begging. During the period of the study, the remaining nine participants were engaged through a voluntary, confidential service.

2. Homelessness includes where a person is without conventional accommodation (e.g. sleeping in a park or car), moving frequently between temporary accommodation (e.g. refuge, emergency housing or hotels) or living in marginal accommodation on a medium to long-term basis (e.g. rooming houses, transitional housing or caravan parks). Nine of study participants reported that they were sleeping rough.

family violence, 37% reported childhood trauma or abuse, 80% had been unable to find work for 12 months or more and 87% had a mental illness.

Justice Connect Homeless Law provides legal representation to people experiencing homelessness. In the last five years, over 800 charges have been laid against people for begging in Victoria.

"We all want to see begging reduced, but it's time we accept that the current response is not working," said Lucy Adams, Manager and Principal Lawyer, Justice Connect Homeless Law.

"We should be tackling the underlying cause of begging, which is a lack of affordable housing for disadvantaged people, and a greater need for homelessness prevention programs," she said.

"Our research shows that people who beg are likely to have suffered severe life trauma and disadvantage, forcing them into arguably one of the most demoralising and humiliating of

situations," said Ms Adams.

The alliance of organisations calling for the decriminalisation of begging includes Justice Connect, Council to Homeless Persons, Melbourne City Mission, cohealth, Launch Housing, StreetSmart and VCOSS.

Jenny Smith, CEO of the Council to Homeless Persons, said, "People who beg need support and housing, not a criminal record. Begging is not a lifestyle choice, for many it's a necessity."

According to Justice Connect, the vast majority of people who beg are passively sitting on the footpath, and aggressive behaviour can and should be dealt with separately by police.

"Police can continue to deal with the very small number of people who beg aggressively by using different laws, such as the offence of using threatening words in a public place. Sitting passively on the footpath with a sign asking for money should not be a crime," said Ms Adams.

Over a two-year period, Justice Connect Homeless Law conducted surveys of people who have begged and found:

- 77% were experiencing homelessness
- 87% had a mental illness

- 77% were experiencing drug or alcohol dependence
- 80% had been unemployed for 12 months or more
- 33% had experienced family violence
- 37% reported childhood trauma or abuse

As part of the 'Asking for Change' campaign, the alliance released a [7-point position paper](#) and [video](#).

Interview opportunities:

- Lucy Adams, Manager and Principal Lawyer, Justice Connect Homeless Law
- Jenny Smith, CEO, Council to Homeless Persons
- Vicki Sutton, CEO, Melbourne City Mission

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