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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 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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