

2022

# Media Messaging Guide

Reporting on  
Homelessness



**Council  
to Homeless  
Persons**

[chp.org.au](http://chp.org.au)

## Reporting on Homelessness

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

The media wields enormous power to change perceptions of homelessness. With broader understanding of the causes of homelessness, it's easier for us to move towards real solutions.

CHP has created these guidelines with background facts, statistics and ethical considerations in relation to reporting on homelessness. Skip to the end for a quick-reference guide on language.

For more facts and statistics on homelessness, visit the CHP website – [www.chp.org.au](http://www.chp.org.au).

CHP oversees the Victorian Homelessness Media Awards that recognise and reward outstanding reporting of homelessness.



**Victorian  
Homelessness  
Media Awards**

### What is homelessness?

Contrary to the stereotype of the man sleeping on a park bench, rough sleepers make up only five per cent of the homeless population in Victoria.<sup>1</sup>

Homelessness is far more than just 'rooflessness'. Homelessness is defined by the ABS as the absence of safe, secure and ongoing accommodation.

The majority of people experiencing homelessness are in temporary and insecure, or unsafe, housing situations, such as couchsurfing, severely overcrowded dwellings, or 'marginal housing' such as caravan parks, rooming houses or government-funded supported accommodation.

### How many people are homeless in Australia?

On 2016 Census night, 24,819 Victorians were counted as experiencing homeless, and over 116,000 people Australia-wide. 40 per cent of people experiencing homelessness are under the age of 25.

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 agencies, which count the number of people who access their services every year.

**39%** of Victorians counted as homeless on Census night were under 25 years old<sup>2</sup>

<b>14%</b>	Under 12	<b>12%</b>	45–54
<b>8%</b>	12–18	<b>7%</b>	55–64
<b>18%</b>	19–24	<b>4%</b>	65–74
<b>22%</b>	25–34	<b>2%</b>	75+
<b>14%</b>	35–44		



## Why are people homeless?

The three biggest drivers of homelessness are a lack of affordable housing, family violence, and financial difficulties.<sup>2</sup>

Issues such as addictions or gambling are not major causes of homelessness.

Just 2% of people seeking help cite either addiction or mental illness as the main reason they need assistance from homelessness services.

Another common myth is that housing options are available but are 'turned down' by people experiencing homelessness. The reality is that often the only accommodation options available to people on very low incomes are dangerous and expensive rooming houses. Sometimes people feel safer 'on the street' because they have experienced violence in this kind of accommodation.

Most people experiencing homelessness want a permanent, affordable home. But, with 82,000 men, women, and children across Victoria waiting for public and community housing, the wait can be many years.<sup>3</sup>

Only 5% of all private rentals in metro Melbourne are affordable for someone on a Centrelink income, and only 0.4% are affordable for singles.<sup>4</sup>

## Loaded words

Use of the term 'homeless' in the media is rarely neutral. For victims of crime who are not in stable housing, their homelessness is often positioned as evidence of their vulnerability. For perpetrators of crime who don't have housing, their homelessness is often used as explanation of their behaviour or crime.<sup>5</sup> Consider how you are framing homelessness in your story.

## Relevance to your story

Is it necessary to mention if someone is homeless if your story has no direct relevance to homelessness (e.g. court reporting)? 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?

This is not to say someone's housing status should never be included in media reports. But be wary of how your news stories connect homelessness to behaviours or crimes.

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**40%** Lack of housing

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**35%** Escaping family violence

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**11%** Money/income issues

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**5%** Relationship/family breakdowns

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**2%** Mental/physical illness and/or addiction

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**7%** Other

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## **Things to consider when reporting on homelessness**

- Homelessness is not necessarily a long-term period in a person's life, and is not an inherent characteristic. Just as the term 'disabled person' is no longer appropriate it is preferable to refer to someone as 'experiencing homelessness' rather than 'a homeless person'.
- Homelessness is not a choice, and framing a story as such perpetuates damaging stereotypes, and can have a direct personal impact on individuals. Focusing on personal decisions distracts the audience from the systemic drivers of homelessness; a shortage of affordable housing, intergenerational poverty and low incomes. Examining the individual without context of structural disadvantage creates a misconception that homelessness cannot be solved with good social policy.
- Pejorative terms such as 'hobo', 'beggar', 'pan-handler' should never be used. Don't diminish the experience of homelessness by using terms such as 'campers'.

## **Use of photos and imagery**

- Where possible use 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 is demoralising. If you wouldn't make the request of a CEO, don't ask your case study to do the same.

## **Focussing on the solutions**

The growing homelessness problem, and personal stories of hardship, can make for good copy, but we urge journalists to incorporate policy solutions into their stories.

CHP can direct you to a range of spokespeople, including academics, practitioners, CEOs and policy makers who can explain the very real and tangible systemic solutions. Ending homelessness requires structural changes to our housing, taxation and welfare systems, more focus on early intervention, and a move away from short-term band-aid responses.

By helping your audience understand the solutions, you are elevating public debate.

## **Working with case studies**

We understand that incorporating personal stories can add strength to your reporting, 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 name/location, be de-identified in photos, especially where family violence has been an issue.
- We strongly advise against using case studies who are still 'in crisis'. By this, we mean someone who is still dealing with the issues that led to their homelessness, and who has yet to access safe, secure accommodation.
- 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 the reach and potential audience of a newspaper or radio station, or of an online article. If the story is going to be in print and online, tell them so.
- Have you disclosed the nature or purpose of the article to the person you are interviewing, or the context in which their story will be used?
- Reiterate prior to interview that anything said may be quoted, even if that sounds obvious as a journalist. Is it possible to read the person's quotes back to them?
- Don't suggest that they might be able to read/listen to the story before it goes to print/air if this is highly unlikely.
- Understand that the person you are interviewing may not be able to make or keep appointments. They may not have a car, or a valid myki, or they may be focussed on finding accommodation. Where possible deal with their support worker (if available/applicable).

## **Using children in media reports relating to homelessness**

CHP strongly discourages 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.

## Directing people to help

Many people who experience homelessness report that they didn't know where to go for help. By including the Victorian 24-hour hotline in your reports, you can direct people to the help they need.

If you are experiencing, or at risk, of homelessness, you can ring the 24-hour Victorian hotline for assistance 1800 825 955.

<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Housing and Population: Estimating Homelessness, 2016

<sup>2</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Specialist Homelessness Services data, 2017-18








<sup>3</sup> Parliamentary inquiry into public housing, June 2018

<sup>4</sup> DHHS Rent Report, December 2019


<sup>5</sup> Young, A., Petty, J. University of Melbourne, Carelessly linking crime to being homeless adds to harmful stigma, The Conversation, May 2019

## Reporting checklist

### DO

-  Refer to 'people experiencing homelessness' not 'homeless people'.
-  Take into account the broader social and economic causes of homelessness.
-  Include the views of people with lived experience of homelessness.
-  Seek the views of homelessness services.
-  Include information about the systemic solutions to homelessness.
-  Give a balanced view of the range of homelessness experiences, not just rough sleeping.
-  Include the following footnote:  
*If you are experiencing, or at risk, of homelessness, this 24-hour Victorian hotline can help 1800 825 955*

### DON'T

-  Use the term 'homeless' if you actually mean 'rough sleeping'.
-  Blame the individual for systemic failures.
-  Use identifiable photographs of people in crisis without their consent (and consider their capacity to consent).
-  Use a photo of a rough sleeper to accompany your story if the story is about other forms of homelessness.
-  Use imagery that perpetuates stereotypes or reinforces inaccurate opinions of homelessness.
-  Identify children in your reporting.
-  Risk re-traumatising interviewees by asking them to give details of their personal history that is unrelated to your story. For example, if you are interviewing them about waiting for public housing, consider if it's necessary to ask them about their employment history, or their family relationships.

## Words matter

While we understand it won't always be possible, please consider these language preferences wherever you can:

Issue	Problematic	Preferred
Homelessness as an inherent characteristic	'... homeless person...'	'... a person experiencing homelessness...'
Homelessness as a lifestyle choice	'... preferring the freedom of life on the streets...'	'... homelessness by definition, is a lack of choice...'
Associating homelessness with criminal activity suggesting causation	'... homeless drug addict...' '... homeless killer...'	'... someone addicted to drugs...' '... a murderer...'
Deserving vs undeserving (i.e. some people bring homelessness on themselves, while others are blameless victims)	'... through no fault of his own, Jeff was forced into a rooming house...'	'... unable to find an affordable place to live, Jeff was forced into a rooming house...'
Terminology used out of context adds to stigma and stereotyping	'... after three days at the festival, I was starting to look like a homeless person...'	'... I looked dishevelled...'

## Seeking comments

Peak bodies and allied organisations can provide helpful background, and comments for stories on homelessness, poverty, affordable housing, and family violence.

**Council to Homeless Persons** – [www.chp.org.au/media/](http://www.chp.org.au/media/)

**Victorian Council for Social Services** – [www.vcoss.org.au/media/](http://www.vcoss.org.au/media/)

**Victorian Public Tenants Association** – [www.vpta.org.au/contact-us/](http://www.vpta.org.au/contact-us/)

**Tenants Victoria** – [www.tenantsvic.org.au/contact/](http://www.tenantsvic.org.au/contact/)

**Domestic Violence Victoria** – [www.dvvic.org.au/about-us/contact-us/](http://www.dvvic.org.au/about-us/contact-us/)

**Aboriginal Housing Victoria** – [www.ahvic.org.au/contact](http://www.ahvic.org.au/contact)

**Community Housing Industry Association** – [www.chiavic.com.au/contact/](http://www.chiavic.com.au/contact/)

**Justice Connect Homeless Law** – [www.justiceconnect.org.au/contact-us/](http://www.justiceconnect.org.au/contact-us/)

**Council to Homeless Persons**  
2 Stanley Street Collingwood Victoria 3066  
/ P 03 8415 6200 / E [admin@chp.org.au](mailto:admin@chp.org.au)  
/ Homelessness Advocacy Service (HAS) 1800 066 256

[chp.org.au](http://chp.org.au)