Hearts and Homes
Public perceptions of homelessness summary report
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Introduction

All Victorians have a right to safe and secure housing; a place they can call home. It is the foundation upon which strong individuals, healthy families and resilient communities are built. However, for some Victorians the reality is quite different.

Victoria is experiencing unprecedented levels of housing stress and homelessness. According to 2016 ABS Census data released in March 2018, more than 24,000 Victorians were homeless on census night. This includes people sleeping rough, living in emergency or temporary accommodation – including people staying with friends and relatives – and people living in severely overcrowded dwellings. This represents an increase of 11.3 per cent or 2,500 people since 2011.

Homelessness affects people of all ages and stages of their life. Census data shows a 23 per cent increase in homelessness among people aged 55 and over in Victoria, while almost 40 per cent of people counted as homeless were under 25 years of age.

A problem this complex requires a whole of community response and a partnership approach. To engage members of the community in addressing this problem, we need to understand people’s existing attitudes towards Victorians experiencing homelessness.

To explore this, the Department of Health and Human Services engaged WhiteGREY and Colmar Brunton to research people’s perceptions and views on homelessness. We wanted to find out how important the issue is for Victorians, what they thought the causes and drivers were, what they thought the most important and effective responses were, and who is, or should, be providing that response to help some of our most vulnerable citizens.

Key findings

- Victorians care deeply about the welfare of those who are experiencing homelessness. A majority of those surveyed want to, and do, give help.
- Victorians are more likely to attribute personal issues such as drug and alcohol use as the reason why people are experiencing homelessness. They generally have a lesser understanding of key systemic causes, such as the availability of social housing.
- A majority of people think short-term interventions like food, blankets and clothing are the most necessary help. They are less aware of the critical need for housing and health supports.
- People are unsure of the role government and business can play to solve homelessness.
## Methodology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Victorians</th>
<th>Count (n)</th>
<th>Per cent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Less than 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 to 34 years</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34 to 54 years</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 and older</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne Metro</td>
<td>714</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Victoria</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Researchers surveyed 1010 people, representative of the overall Victorian population, via an independently-administered qualitative questionnaire between 31 January and 7 February 2018.

The sample was stratified to represent the Victorian population by age, location and gender.

Statistical weighting was applied to the raw sample to adjust for minor differences between the population and the survey sample.

## Attitudes towards homelessness

When presented with a list of topical news issues, one fifth of Victorians (20 per cent) said homelessness was the most serious issue facing Victoria today. A further 26 per cent said it was the second most serious issue facing Victoria. Overall, homelessness was ranked as a more serious problem than bushfires or traffic congestion. A further six in ten Victorians (61 per cent) perceive homelessness is an issue which is getting worse, not better. People surveyed generally had a positive attitude and a high level of empathy towards Victorians who were experiencing homelessness.
Survey participants were asked to rate a series of questions from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. Disagree - bottom three, agree - top three.

No-one deserves to be homeless. 68 per cent agree
2 per cent disagree

Homeless people deserve as much help as anyone else. 48 per cent agree
2 per cent disagree

The Victorian community has a responsibility to help homeless people. 37 per cent agree
6 per cent disagree

We should not judge homeless people as we don’t know their story. 60 per cent agree
2 per cent disagree

Homelessness can happen to anyone – we are all just one bad decision away from homelessness. 41 per cent agree
7 per cent disagree

Most people become homeless because of drug and alcohol issues. 24 per cent agree
9 per cent disagree

Homeless people don’t look after themselves. 16 per cent agree
10 per cent disagree

Homeless people are a nuisance. 12 per cent agree
25 per cent disagree

Homeless people make more money begging than some unemployed people. 18 per cent agree
18 per cent disagree

It is the homeless person’s responsibility to get off the streets. 15 per cent agree
13 per cent disagree
Perceived causes of homelessness

While there is a growing understanding of how domestic violence and abuse can lead to a person experiencing homelessness, people have a more limited knowledge of how housing issues and low income can result in homelessness. Instead, Victorians tend to think people experience homelessness because of their individual challenges, such as mental health concerns or alcohol abuse, rather than the reality of more complex, systemic issues.

As far as you know, what are the three most common reasons why people become homeless in Victoria?

Drugs and alcohol: 60%
Mental health: 43%
Gambling: 13%
Poor financial decisions: 11%
Injury, sickness or disability: 8%
Lifestyle choice: 7%

Domestic violence and abuse: 34%
Relationship breakdown: 12%
Lack of support from family: 12%
Conflict with parents: 9%

Unemployment: 33%
Cost of housing in Victoria: 20%
Lack of public housing: 16%
Low incomes: 13%
Lack of crisis accommodation: 9%
Less than 1 in 10 people cited a lack of crisis accommodation as a primary cause of homelessness.

Only 20 per cent of people said the cost of housing was a primary cause of homelessness. 16 per cent identified a lack of public housing as a key concern.

6 in 10 people believed drugs and alcohol use was a primary cause of homelessness.

Just under half of all respondents identified mental health issues as a major reason why people experienced homelessness.

1 in 3 people cited domestic violence as a primary cause of homelessness.

**Victorians want to help**

A majority of people want to support other Victorians who are experiencing homelessness. Victorians give most frequently to homelessness-related causes, with 57 per cent donating time, money or goods and giving directly to people who are homeless. In comparison, 44 per cent gave to health-related charities, and 34 per cent gave to animal-related charities.

About 46 per cent are already highly engaged in supporting people who are homeless, many feeling a personal responsibility to do so. However, of these, some people (37 per cent) were unsure of the best way to help or if their efforts were having a positive, long-term impact.
Respondents were segregated into profiles, based on their responses to attitudinal questions.

- **I want to help, what can I do? (28 per cent)**
  Supports people who are homeless directly and through long term giving. Feels responsible, but lacks direction on best way to help.

- **I've given enough already (24 per cent)**
  Somewhat engaged in supporting people who are homeless, however, think people who are homeless are receiving enough support.

- **Don't know, don't care (21 per cent)**
  Disengaged from supporting people who are homeless. See onus of responsibility on homeless person.

- **The community should help, not me (9 per cent)**
  Sympathetic to the issues homeless people face but feel that it’s a community responsibility to help, not their own responsibility.

- **It’s our responsibility (9 per cent)**
  Very engaged in supporting people experiencing homelessness – particularly with long-term support. Feels a sense of responsibility as being part of a community.

- **Weary givers (9 per cent)**
  Very engaged in supporting people who are homeless, but feel their efforts are not resulting in a net benefit.
7 in 10 people surveyed empathised with people who were experiencing homelessness and wanted to directly help.

Nearly 50 per cent of Victorians are taking practical steps to help those experiencing homelessness – including giving food, clothing, making donations and volunteering.

Almost 10 per cent of those surveyed were supporting people experiencing homelessness, but felt their giving efforts were not resulting in a net-benefit.

A further 28 per cent wanted better direction to make sure they were taking the right actions.
Knowledge of supports

Most Victorians have a good awareness of where people experiencing homelessness can receive help with their immediate needs – such as a meal, access to a shower, clothing or blankets. Many also believe these short-term responses are more effective than long-term sources of support. Of those surveyed, fewer people were aware of long-term supports such as housing, counselling and mental help. They were also less likely to rate them as being effective.

As far as you know, which of the following types of help are available to homeless people in Victoria?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Help</th>
<th>Available Rate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Places to get a meal</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothes and blankets</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money, given by passers-by</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Places to have a shower</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical health care</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for temporary accommodation</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug and alcohol counselling</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental and emotional help</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help to find permanent accommodation</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income support</td>
<td>45%</td>
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Perceptions of the availability of supports also presented some interesting findings. Victorians saw long-term accommodation as being the top support for people experiencing homelessness which is in short supply (68 per cent said there was not enough support). However, people also identified there were not enough places to have a meal (53 per cent) or a shower (61 per cent). The area of least need was seen to be the availability of money given from passers-by (38 per cent said there was enough support).
More than 8 in 10 people know where a person experiencing homelessness can go to get a meal. Nearly 60 per cent agree providing meals is an effective support.

More than 7 in 10 people know where a person experiencing homelessness can go to get clothing or blankets. More than 50 per cent agree this is an effective support.

Nearly half of those surveyed know where a person experiencing homelessness can have a shower. About 46 per cent agreed it was an effective support.

Fewer than 6 in 10 people were aware of the availability of temporary or emergency accommodation for people experiencing homelessness. About 38 per cent of people agreed it was an effective support.

Similarly, 6 in 10 people were aware of the availability of drug and alcohol counselling, but only 37 per cent of people said it was effective.

Only half of respondents were aware of somewhere a person experiencing homelessness could get mental and emotional help. Less than 40 per cent agreed this was an effective method of support.
Who is responsible for providing support?

People have moderate opinions about where responsibility lies for providing support for people experiencing homelessness and recognise that the whole of community – from businesses to the Australian government has a role to play.

When given a sliding scale, a majority of people thought the Victorian Government, charities, families, businesses, local governments, the Australian Government and even homeless people themselves were doing ‘about the right amount’ to provide help.

Charities were perceived as giving the most supports to those experiencing homelessness, with only 6 per cent saying they didn’t do enough and 13 per cent saying those organisations did ‘too much’.

In comparison:

- 29 per cent of people perceived the Australian Government was not doing enough; only 6 per cent of people thought it was doing too much
- 24 per cent of people thought the Victorian Government was not doing enough; only 8 per cent of people thought it was doing too much
- 21 per cent of people perceived businesses were not doing enough; only 5 per cent of people thought the private sector was doing too much.

Many people also identified businesses as not having a role in supporting people experiencing homelessness, compared to other community stakeholders.

Summary

- Victorians perceive homelessness as a serious issue facing our state – ranking it as more important than bushfires or traffic congestion.
- Nearly 50 per cent of Victorians are taking practical steps to help those experiencing homelessness – including giving food, clothing, making donations and volunteering.
- However, almost 40 per cent of Victorians were either unsure their efforts to help were effective or wanted better direction on how to make a positive difference.
- Victorians are more likely to attribute personal issues such as drug and alcohol use as reason why people are experiencing homelessness. They generally have a lesser understanding of key systemic causes, such as the availability of social housing.
- Victorians are well informed about short-term responses which serve immediate needs of people – such as a meal, access to a shower, clothing or blankets, but are less aware of longer-term supports which make a critical difference for people experiencing homelessness such as mental and emotional help, help to find permanent accommodation and income support.
- They are also more likely to think that short term support is more effective but less available than longer term support.
- People surveyed identified the Victorian Government and Australian Government among the best placed to take further responsibility and help more people experiencing homelessness.
- Most Victorians recognise the whole community – including business, charities, governments and families, need to work together if we are to end homelessness.