

## Melbourne's homelessness crisis can be fixed, but not by rants

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It is disingenuous and lightweight to righteously rant about symptoms, rather than do the hard work that goes with solving problems by redressing actual causes. But such is the pathetic populism emanating from some ideological media outlets and some community leaders in response to the increasingly evident problem of homelessness in Melbourne.

We hasten to note we robustly maintain all are equal under the law, and those, including homeless people, who menace and intimidate citizens should be prosecuted. But the "tough on crime" and "round 'em up and move 'em on" mentality is neither an enlightened nor effective reaction to the growing number of people sleeping rough in the world's most liveable city.

Our belief that homelessness necessitates pragmatic policy is not a "bleeding heart" position; it's about decent and cost-effective results, rather than the indecent rhetoric recently spewing into our public debate.

We have, for example, the police Chief Commissioner bizarrely and ridiculously claiming the homeless people on Flinders Street are opportunistic "criminals" on a collective "shake down" to prey on tourists.

We have a lord mayor who seems to be sending mixed messages. Robert Doyle has reportedly been talking of new laws to facilitate the forcible removal of homeless people from the CBD, only a matter of days after rightly decrying that very approach as ineffective and morally undesirable, and stating that the police already have manifold legal recourse. We await the city council's considered response to homelessness.

Fortunately, there is also much sanity in the debate. Last week, the leaders of as many as 36 homelessness, housing and social services organisations wrote an open letter that identified some of the core reasons why people are homeless. Two of the most important points these experts make is homelessness is a long-term issue and thus cannot be solved via edict and sanction, and that homelessness is fundamentally related to high housing costs in general and a lack of affordable public housing.

So, how might homelessness be alleviated and even eradicated? First, increase the supply of public and other forms of affordable community housing. This can be readily done by the state government – which has been making progress on the issue by increasing funding for public housing – ensuring some of the wealth created by increasing housing and commercial density along public transport routes is invested in community housing.

Second, the state government should buy properties like StKilda's Gatwick Hotel, long a residence of last resort for people without a permanent home, and run them as public housing.

Third, Australia should emulate the "Housing First" policy proving so successful in the United States. It has all but solved homelessness – in a cost-effective way – in a number of cities, simply by giving the homeless a dwelling, and then working on underlying causes including mental ill health, family violence, addiction and lack of education.

Fourth, the federal government should remove distortions from the property market, so that resources go into expanding supply, rather than encouraging speculation in existing stock. In other words, the government should end negative gearing and capital gains tax concessions to property speculators.

Fifth, property developers capitalising on land values increased by public investment along existing public transport routes should be required to provide significant chunks of community housing within residential projects.

Blaming victims – that resort of scoundrels and charlatans – is ignorant and absurd.

*This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/the-age-editorial/melbournes-homelessness-crisis-can-be-fixed-but-not>*

