

SUNDAY DEBATE

Are we too soft on beggars?

“ The misguided bleeding hearts opposing these measures are part of the problem

GIVING money to beggars is akin to voting for the Greens — it only encourages them, and prevents them from doing something useful with their lives.

Melbourne City Council and Victoria Police should be applauded for their tough-love approach in cracking down on the begging scourge.

The root causes aren't going to be fixed anytime soon, but there's no reason not to treat the symptoms.

Under the new anti-begging strategy that involves the co-operation of the Salvation Army, beggars will be prosecuted and sent to a diversion program where they will receive health checks and help in finding work.

Those suffering from mental health issues will be given the opportunity to seek appropriate treatment.

The misguided bleeding hearts opposing these measures are part of the problem, these limp-wristed enablers prefer the law not to be enforced and for this persistent problem



Rita Panahi

YES

to remain a blight on the city. If you give money to beggars then you can be sure of one thing: you are contributing to a desperate person's drug and/or alcohol troubles.

The money given is not spent on food or shelter. Welfare agencies ensure that anyone in need can eat three free meals a day and most nights there are beds available at shelters.

There are also myriad programs available to those who find themselves on the

street. If you genuinely want help to find work and get your life on track, you will find good people willing to help you.

It is profoundly sad to see able-bodied young people born in the lucky country resort to begging.

If you can loiter on the streets all day or harass drivers at intersections with unwanted windshield washes then you can find meaningful work.

Indeed some beggars treat their chosen "profession" with the type of proactive enthusiasm that one typically sees in door-to-door salesmen.

Their aggressive tactics make them not just a nuisance but a threat to public safety.

I've encountered beggars in many countries without our comprehensive safety net who experience the type of poverty that is thankfully unknown in Australia.

We are a rich country with one of the most generous welfare systems in the world — there is simply no good reason why beggars should continue to plague our streets.

“ If we can put up with poverty, we should be able to put up with begging

LAST week, the Lord Mayor revealed in the *Herald Sun* that the city has had more complaints about begging in a few months than it has had in years.

Apparently patience with people who beg in Melbourne is wearing thin.

It's not clear what's behind the spike in begging complaints. Are more people begging? Are we less tolerant? Is begging more aggressive and less "passive" than in the past?

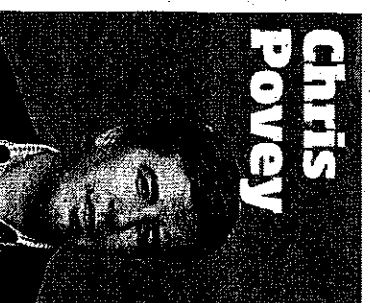
A couple of things are clear. At this stage there is no evidence to suggest we are at risk of a wave of begging-related assault and intimidation.

Nor do police ignore begging.

Recent sentencing statistics show hundreds of people were charged with begging during a two-year period and that people who end up in court can face fines and prison.

It's also clear that people who beg are seriously down on their luck.

A survey we did of people begging in Melbourne's



Chris Povey

NO

CBD revealed that 90 per cent were homeless and living rough or in shelters, squats or rooming houses.

In addition to being homeless, people you see sitting on the ground with a few coins in their hat have often experienced violence and have physical or mental health issues.

And far from being professionals, the people we've spoken with feel humiliated when they beg. Begging is about poverty.

On a day-to-day basis we can conveniently forget that Victoria has a significant homelessness problem.

More than 22,000 people are homeless in Victoria. More than 30,000 people are waiting for public housing.

There is almost no affordable private rental and homelessness services are jammed with overwhelming demand.

It's easy to accept poverty if you don't see it. Just as it's easy to ignore homelessness unless a rooming house opens next door or someone starts sleeping in their car at the local park.

But begging is different because it confronts us on our way to work or doing our shopping.

Begging does blight Melbourne. It represents a political and policy failure to prevent homelessness and poverty.

If we as a community can put up with poverty, we should be able to put up with begging.

Chris Povey is manager and principal lawyer, PILCH Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic