

The homelessness crisis gripping Melbourne

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Homelessness in Melbourne has reached "emergency" levels, with the city overwhelmed by rough sleepers and welfare agencies unable to meet surging demand for housing.

Hundreds of complaints have been made by Melbourne residents and businesses, distressed that footpaths are being overtaken by "squats" and Melbourne's image tarnished.

Homeless 'are people who need our help'

Melbourne grapples with the complex homelessness issue as Lord Mayor Robert Doyle says "we understand these are people who need our help". The issue continues to be a difficult one, as reported in May. *Courtesy ABC News 24.*

Salvation Army major Brendan Nottle said the city was at a crisis point.

"I think it's overwhelming," he said.

"We've just been through a federal election and there was no mention of homelessness. And yet I think in a lot of people's minds it is a crisis, not just for our city but for cities around the country."

Documents obtained by Fairfax Media through freedom-of-information laws detail more than 200 telephone and email complaints made to Melbourne City Council about homelessness in the 15-month period to April this year.

The records show a call from a man "from David Jones" who said the presence of a couple sleeping and begging outside the department store on Bourke Street was "not really desirable for business".

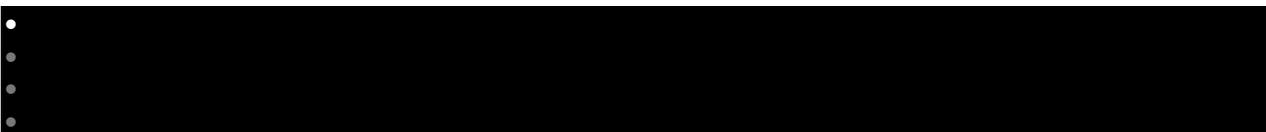
David Jones later said the complaint was not made through official channels and its approach to the issue was "one of concern and respect for homeless people".



Emma is homeless and sleeps in front of the David Jones store in Bourke Street. Photo: Justin McManus

Yet the caller still shared the sentiments of many, who believed the record numbers of rough sleepers were "not a good look for the city".

A businessman said he was considering relocating his Collins Street store after more than three decades, while on Swanston Street a souvenir seller said five people sleeping in front of his shop were turning away tourists.



Homeless camps surge in the city



A camp set up in Melbourne. Photo: Pat Scala

At least 30 homeless camps have been set up around the central city, with tents and sleeping equipment erected in laneways, doorways, on footpaths, under bridges and in private properties.

Drug use and the accumulation of rubbish and filth is often a concern.

A training college in Elizabeth Street said it spent \$2000 on forensic cleaners and the replacement of a door due to the "bodily waste" deposited by rough sleepers who had breached a stairwell.

Lord mayor Robert Doyle said the council had to call in the police after discovering "a little injecting room" set up in a blocked-off section of a CBD laneway.

"We should be supportive of people that are vulnerable, but we shouldn't romanticise the situation," he said.

"There are challenging, illegal behaviours that we shouldn't put up with, whether people are homeless or not."



Melbourne City Council has been flooded with complaints about homeless people in the CBD. Photo: Eddie Jim

Elizabeth Street has become a problem spot, attracting larger gatherings of people with pets and extensive camps made of mattresses, desks, milk crates and trolleys. Violent confrontations have been reported between some rough sleepers, and passers-by have complained of being screamed at.

"I have been abused and harassed on a fairly regular basis. I have had colleagues who had had the same experience" said one woman who emailed the council.

The unprecedented surge of rough sleepers in the central city has been confirmed by a recent council count which found 247 people living on the streets – a 74 per cent increase in two years.

Homeless services are linking this increase to the closure of a number of caravan parks and inner-city rooming houses that have been bought by developers.

Launch Housing, the key agency charged with finding accommodation for homeless people in the CBD, is now calling on the state government to rent or buy about 200 properties to help make up the shortfall.

"I appreciate it's not a budget [issue] at the moment, but we can't wait another budget cycle," Launch Housing deputy chief executive Heather Holst said.

"This is an emergency and I think members of the public are quite right to be concerned and upset."

Premier Daniel Andrews said although the state government had invested heavily to tackle the problem of homelessness – particularly in relation to family violence – it was clear more needed to be done.

"I think we all need to acknowledge that it is on the rise, we need to do more and for our part we are absolutely determined to do that," Mr Andrews said.

State Housing Minister Martin Foley said he was open to discussing new ways to assist rough sleepers ahead of a wider housing affordability package later this year.

It is also expected that the state government's \$152 million pledge for accommodation for people escaping family violence will make a significant dent in the numbers of people living on the streets.

Nevertheless, the Salvation Army's Major Nottle warned that the current "entrenched" homelessness crisis could not be solved by a single government over a single term. He demanded a national and bipartisan strategy to tackle the roots of the problem in the suburbs and regional areas.

It is not illegal to sleep in a public place, but some of the Melburnians who contacted the council urged it to simply "move on the homeless" out of sight.

Robert Kramer, 68, who has been sleeping rough in Enterprize Park, said he did not know what else to do. "Work's gone, there's not enough places, some of us can't work, so we come here."

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