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Media guidelines for reporting on homelessness

This week's SBS TV program *'Filthy Rich and Homeless'* will likely generate a range of community conversations and media coverage about homelessness in Australia.

"The media has significant power to improve our understanding of the causes of homelessness, as well as the solutions. Conversely, it can incite negative responses, perpetuate misconceptions and stigmatise people experiencing homelessness," said Jenny Smith, Homelessness Australia.

"People sleeping rough represent around six per cent of all homelessness in Australia: a small but highly visible proportion. They are among society's most disadvantaged and negative portrayal of their circumstances entrenches this disadvantage."

"However, rough sleeping is just one aspect of homelessness in Australia. Nine-out-of-10 Australians experiencing homelessness are in rooming houses or crisis accommodation, are couchsurfing, sleeping in cars, caravan parks or in other forms of insecure housing.

"Another common misconception is that most people who experience homelessness are older men, when in fact almost half of those who are homeless on any given night, are women, and one in six are children under 10.

"Contrary to the belief that mental illness and drug addiction are at the root of homelessness, family violence and a shortage of affordable housing are the leading causes of homelessness," she said.

"Programs such as *Filthy Rich and Homeless* walk a fine line between poverty porn and investigative journalism, but a positive outcome is renewed attention on both causes and solutions."

"The homelessness crisis is not new and the causes of it are not new; Australia is in the grips of an affordable housing crisis that has been building over many years. The increased rough sleeping we see on the streets is the most visible symptom of a broken housing market. State and federal governments hold the levers to fix it, through changes to our taxation system, direct funding to build more public and community housing, changes to planning laws and increases to Centrelink incomes.

"Considerable evidence from both overseas and in Australia has demonstrated that *rapid rehousing* of people experiencing homelessness is the most successful and cost-effective solution. Approaches that attempt to address homelessness without providing housing consistently fail," said Ms Smith.

Homelessness Australia has produced the following quick reference guide to assist journalists reporting on homelessness. In a fast moving media landscape, we hope that these guidelines will make it easier for journalists to deliver balanced, ethical and factual reporting. We encourage you to contact us if you have questions. lanie@chp.org.au or 0418 552 377

Do:

- ✓ Refer to 'people experiencing homelessness' not 'homeless people'
- ✓ Take into account the broader social and economic causes of homelessness (see housing facts below)
- ✓ Include the views of people with lived experience of homelessness and homelessness services

- ✓ Include information about the systemic solutions to homelessness
- ✓ Give a balanced view of the range of homelessness experiences, not just rough sleeping

Don't:

- x Blame the individual for systemic failures like the absence of affordable housing

- x Use identifiable photographs of people in crisis without their consent (and consider their capacity to consent)
- x Use imagery that perpetuates stereotypes or reinforces inaccurate opinions of homelessness
- x Perpetuate fear of people who are experiencing homelessness; they are 11 times more likely to be the victim of violence than the perpetrator

- Housing: 45%
- Family violence: 26%
- Financial Issue: 12%
- Other relationship issues: 8%
- Physical, mental health & addiction: 3%
- Other 6%

Quick facts

How many people are homeless?

- 105,000 Australians are homeless (ABS, 2011), including 7,000 people rough sleeping
- Rough sleeping represents just 6% of all homelessness in Australia
- 42 per cent of all those experiencing homelessness in Australia are under 25
- 279,000 Australians sought help from homelessness services; 60% of them were women (AIHW, 2015-16)

Why do people become homeless (AIHW, 2015-6)?

Housing affordability and homelessness

- There are 195,000 households waiting for public and community housing in Australia
- Newstart recipients receive \$268/week + up to \$66 Commonwealth Rent Assistance. The median rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Melbourne is \$290/week (DHHS, 2016). The median rent for a newly-let one-bedroom property in Sydney is \$480/week (Housing NSW, 2016)
- In Greater Sydney less than 1 per cent of private rentals were affordable for pensioners and those on other Centrelink benefits
- 590,163 low-income households across Australia are living in rent stress, paying more than they can afford for housing

Working with 'case studies'.

We understand that incorporating a personal story is often a necessary part of illustrating a theoretical concept.

Please consider whether the person you are interviewing has a good enough grasp of the media to give their informed consent to be interviewed. Also consider whether their current situation might be hampering their ability to give consent.

Don't presume that they know the reach and potential audience of a newspaper or radio station or of an online article, or the impact publicity may have on their lives.

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Media enquiries: Lanie Harris, Homelessness Australia, 0418 552 377 or lanie@chp.org.au

