

BRIEFING PAPER

Compassion not Coercion

Addressing the question of begging



CRISIS

**Fighting for hope for
homeless people**

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Introduction

For some time now I have watched with trepidation at the gradual slide towards coercion and enforcement as a means of tackling the problem of begging. Increasingly the talk has been of bans and fines, of criminal records and prison sentences.

Yet people who beg are amongst the most damaged and vulnerable people in our society. The vast majority are homeless; they suffer from a combination of poor skills, low income, poor housing, bad health, substance misuse and family breakdown. Few, if any, are in their situation by choice. Personal crises and the traumatising nature of homelessness combined with the difficulties accessing essential services such as healthcare and drug detox services prevent them from escaping their predicament.

Using methods of enforcement to deal with begging is wrong because it criminalises an already vulnerable section of our population increasing their contact with the police and criminal justice system. This is not only a costly and ineffective means of tackling what is essentially a symptom of deprivation, but it is unlikely to address the root causes of begging and may have the effect of exacerbating the problems facing people who are first and foremost in need of a helping hand.

There is no doubt in my mind that begging is a problem that must be tackled head on, not because people who beg are criminals, but because they are caught up in an activity that is dangerous, damaging and humiliating and are trapped in a cycle of poverty and deprivation. Theirs is a plight that cannot be ignored. The question is not whether we should tackle this problem, but how.

I have devoted much of my professional life to dealing with homeless people and have often worked with people who beg and I believe

passionately that the solutions to begging must be based upon principles of compassion and methods of positive engagement. Methods that empower people by providing them with real and positive choices and by giving them the support necessary to help them overcome the difficulties that they face.

The reality of begging

The vast majority of people who beg are homeless in one form or another; many are in fact rough sleepers and all of them vulnerable. Evidence of their vulnerability is stark and overwhelming. The overcrowded, cold, damp and unsanitary conditions of homelessness are highly conducive to physical and mental ill health and there is evidence of a growing subculture of drink and drugs.

Research has shown that nearly one in fifty of homeless people have TB – 25 times the national averageⁱⁱ; at least one in five homeless people suffer from mental health problemsⁱⁱⁱ and four out of five homeless people interviewed for a Crisis report released last year were addicted to either drink or drugs^{iv}. Often an individual will have a combination of all of these problems.^v

These are shocking statistics and yet they tell only part of the story. Homelessness is both a cause and a consequence of severe trauma and personal crisis, with 33% of homeless people citing relationship breakdown as one of their reasons for first sleeping rough.^{vi} Loneliness and isolation is common and results in one in four ex-homeless people being unable to sustain a tenancy.^{vii}

People who beg do so out of need, not greed. The monetary benefits of begging are slight and the risks of street life are high. Rough sleepers, for example, appear to be up to 15 times more likely to experience assault than the wider population and 35 times more likely to be victims of wounding^{viii}. Despite the stories that are sometimes circulated in the press the reality is that a person begging is lucky if they end their day with ten or twenty pounds in takings. This money will be spent on food, tobacco and for those who are victims of substance misuse, alcohol and drugs.

Most people who beg describe their experience as degrading and uncomfortable and are desperate to get out of their situation^x but lack the skills, confidence and support to do so; they are trapped by their problems into a downward spiral of dependency and deprivation. Despite the efforts of many people in government and the voluntary sector, we are light years away from having the necessary support and services to help vulnerable homeless people to deal with the problems that entrap them.

The most obvious example of this is the issue of substance misuse. It is a widely acknowledged fact that many people who beg suffer from this problem but accessing detox services remains extremely difficult, with many in the homelessness sector reporting a genuine lack of services and appropriate support.

Similarly, for those people who are forced to live their lives on the street there are few practical alternatives to their lifestyle. Employment is often an unlikely option as an immediate solution and many activities that we take for granted – visiting a friend’s home, having a hobby, going to the pub, or joining a club – are out of bounds for those who live on the streets. Homeless people themselves often speak of the frustration that they feel when they are faced by whole days with nothing to do, nowhere to go and no way to move on.

Why enforcement is an inappropriate means of tackling begging

To punish someone who needs help is, I believe, fundamentally wrong; using methods of enforcement to tackle begging is unjust, unworkable and a waste of public resources.

Where an individual is violent this behaviour must be dealt with through the criminal justice system. However begging is for the large part a low level nuisance and beggars are in practice far more likely to be victims of serious crime than they are to perpetrate it. People who beg do so as a strategy for survival rather than as a means of illegally

accumulating wealth or with any particular intent to harm or cause offence. Rather than seeing begging as a crime we should see it for what it is; a cry for help.

Dragging beggars through the criminal justice system is counter productive. A criminal record that will make it even more difficult for them to find work and housing, giving them a fine that they will not be able to pay or insisting that they carry out a community sentence that they will not be able to fulfil is not a way forward. All of these supposed solutions to begging fail to address the underlying causes of the problem, often they make it worse. If someone begs because of substance misuse, then providing them with help to overcome their addiction is the most effective way to tackle the problem; punishing them for begging is not.

Both police and magistrates have in the past expressed frustration at the futility of tackling begging through the criminal justice system. Many recognise that there are far more effective ways of solving the problem and their failure to make full use of existing legislation, much of which provides a range of punitive measures, is testimony to this.

The criminal justice system is already overstretched with 5,600 men, women and children being sentenced in Criminal Courts every day in England and Wales.^x Adding even more beggars to these numbers will place an increased and unnecessary burden upon the system. The cost of processing people in this way is high, both in police time and taxpayers' money and it is wasted if the real reasons why people beg are not addressed.

A way forward: Finding solutions to begging

So what are the solutions to begging? The first step must be recognition that begging is not in and of itself a criminal behaviour, and as a consequence should not be treated as such. People who beg are first and foremost extremely vulnerable individuals who need our help and support.

Within this framework I would suggest four steps need to be taken in order to deal with the problem of begging:

- 1) Put in place the necessary and appropriate support and services to enable people who beg to overcome the problems that they face: access to accommodation, detox services and primary health care, to name three.
- 2) Build upon and improve methods of engaging with people on the street that do not involve the police authorities. Beggars need the opportunity to do something about their predicament. For some years now we have had "outreach teams" whose task it is to go out on the streets and engage with people sleeping rough. Their role should be extended to include beggars; they should be provided with appropriate resources.
- 3) Create genuine alternatives to street life: places where they can feel welcome and safe, where they are given the opportunity to start to rebuild social networks, their skills and their self-esteem; places of learning that cater for different levels of need and different levels of ability; places where people can begin to address their problems at their own pace and in their own time and where they will be provided with support and encouragement for their efforts.
- 4) Involve beggars in tackling the issue of begging and give them a say in developing solutions: people who beg understand better than anyone the causes and the consequences of begging.

Conclusion

Begging raises the question of how we deal with some of the most vulnerable people in our society. There is urgency to the task that we face. Begging is unacceptable and should not be allowed to exist; but my hope is that in seeking to address it we recognise the issue for what it really is, a symptom of deprivation and social exclusion, and seek to tackle these problems first. Surely the answer lies in compassion not coercion, in engagement not enforcement.



Shaks Ghosh
Chief Executive, Crisis

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Crisis
64 Commercial Street
London E1 6LT

Tel: 0870 011 3335

Fax: 0870 011 3336

Email: enquiries@crisis.org.uk

Website: www.crisis.org.uk

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