



City of the homeless

Census stats show crisis is worst since Great Depression

**LAURIE NOWELL and
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MORE than 30,000 Victorians are now officially homeless — more than at any time since the Great Depression.

Census figures from 2006 to be released next month will show about 3000 children are among those without permanent housing.

And welfare agencies say the figure has soared even higher during the past 12 months because of the mortgage crisis and a related squeeze on private rental homes.

Melbourne City Council is about to launch a head count of people sleeping rough in the city centre, and the Federal Government will release a green paper in May that is expected to outline a 10-year plan to combat rising homelessness.

“The numbers are dramatically up, everyone is waiting with bated breath for the official census figures to be released,” Caroline Adler, manager of the PILCH (Public Interest Law Clearing House) Homeless

Persons Legal Centre, said.

“But it’s clear we are facing a crisis, with the need for crisis accommodation far outweighing the capacity of agencies to take clients on,” she said.

Wesley Outreach Mission says it has seen a 25 per cent rise in people seeking help across the city during the past year.

“Many of these are not people with mental illness or other problems. They are families who have lost their homes,” outreach service co-ordinator Annabel Austin said.

“We are seeing increasing numbers of clients seeking assistance as a result of the mortgage crisis,” she said.

“We can’t help people to pay their mortgages, but we are helping more and more people with basic utility bills and in buying food to put on the table.

‘Many of these are not people with mental illness or other problems, they are families who have lost their homes’

“We have two programs — in Footscray and Ringwood — and it’s the same story on both sides of the city. There’s not enough affordable housing or well-run rooming houses for singles or people with complex needs.”

Melbourne City Mission youth services manager Sherrie Bruinhout said the agency was receiving 200 requests a week for help from young people.

“But there are just four to six vacancies. We help 4000 people each week. About 14 per cent are homeless and another 30 per cent fear they will be soon,” she said.

“With interest rate rises, we have seen levels of affordable private rentals drop.”

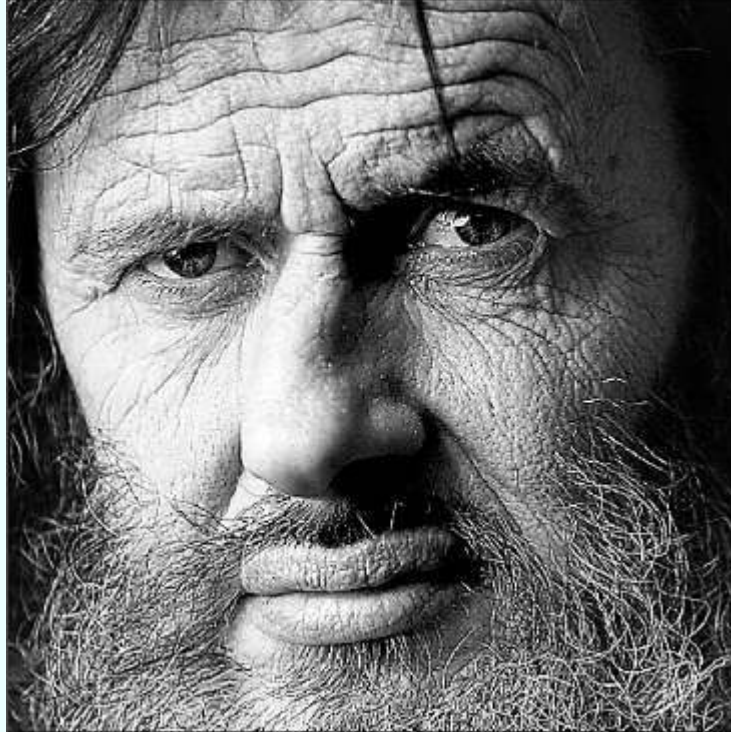
Ms Bruinhout said the agency’s Footscray service was helping 1000 children every week.

Victorian Council of Social Service spokesman David Imber said the effect of homelessness on individuals and families was immense: “We should all be seeking to combat this.”

Pictures: TIM CARRAFA



NO PLACE TO CALL THEIR OWN



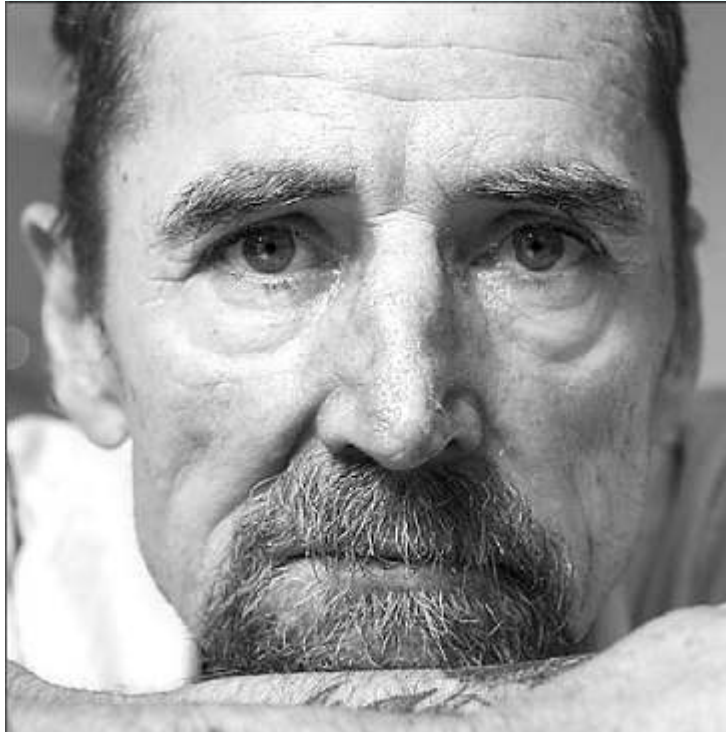
DAVID Robinson was 22 when he was diagnosed with mild schizophrenia.

He was trying to study, but soon found himself unable to overcome his inner demons. Before long he had nowhere to live but on the streets of Melbourne.

Mr Robinson has been in hospital many times and now wants to be a psychologist so he can help others.

He said when people came to him saying they were suffering from a mental illness, were homeless and couldn't sleep at night or received strange looks from people passing in the street, he understood their pain.

The 50-year-old was finally helped by Salvation Army mental health services, who helped him break the cycle and find housing and stability in life.



TREVOR Scarman has lived a lifetime on the streets, but finally has found the courage to face his demons.

He spent a large part of his 35 years of drug abuse and 20 years of homelessness in desperate acts of self-destruction, especially following the overdose death of his first girlfriend.

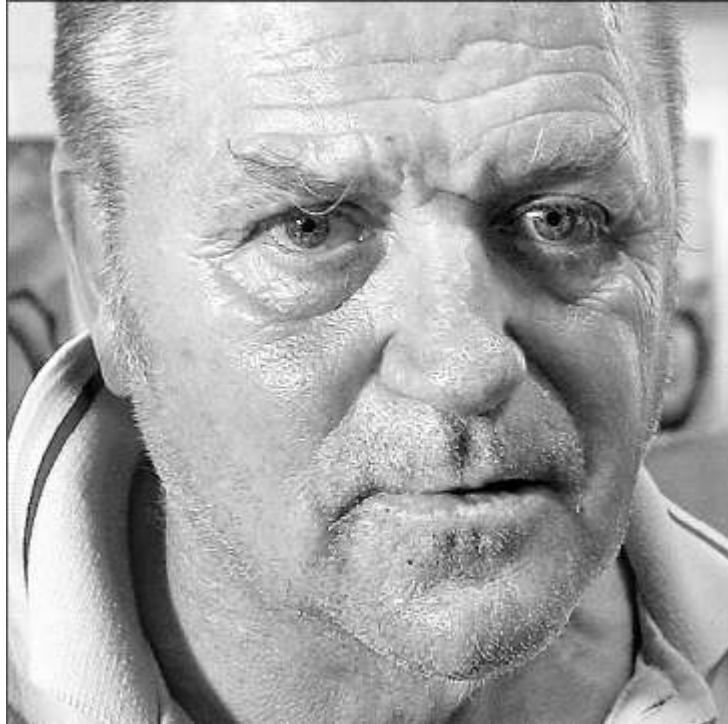
"I just went flat out after that —

trying to block it out. I was a dead man walking," he says.

He looks at young people on the street and wishes he could find the words to stop them following the same path, but says it is difficult.

It is 19 months since he quit his heroin habit and Trevor says he has improved daily.

He is now studying a literacy course and is excited about finally going for his driving licence.



BARRY Dawes said getting cold was the least of his worries while homeless in Melbourne.

A piece of cardboard kept him warm, but the terror he felt as his life spiralled out of control was a different issue.

"I used to drink to get rid of the fear," he said.

"I'm an alcoholic."

He said addiction stole the best years of his life. He doesn't know why it took him more than 20 years to get off the streets and away from the danger he faced on a daily basis

Mr Dawes misses his friends living outside and says it still feels strange to have his own home.

"It's a palace," he said proudly of his private room in a Brotherhood of St Laurence boarding house.



SHEREE Daly has a smile so bright you don't immediately notice the shadows under her eyes.

The 31-year-old says she has suffered unspeakable crimes as a child at home. She ran away to live on the streets.

She remembers being a frightened 14-year-old with nowhere warm to sleep.

"You sleep in any old broken building you can find," she said.

She hopes Kevin Rudd is serious about finding a solution to homelessness, but says he will not be able to do that from the comfort of Kirribilli House.

"No one knows what it's like until they are out here," she says.

"He needs to come and live on the streets, not just for one day, but for a few days."