

CHARITY FOR HOMELESS TELLS PEOPLE NOT TO GIVE MONEY TO BEGGARS

A major homeless charity is urging people not to give money to beggars this Christmas. The comments by Thames Reach, an organisation which provides support to more than 8,000 homeless people in London, are likely to reignite the debate about the merits of giving cash to people who ostensibly live on the streets. The intervention echoes comments made by the previous government's spokesperson on homelessness who sparked a furore a decade ago when she described cash handouts to the homeless as "misplaced goodwill".

But Thames Reach is citing "overwhelming evidence that people who beg on the street do so to buy hard drugs particularly crack cocaine and heroin". Members estimate 80% of people begging do so to support a drug habit. The research is corroborated by the results of drug tests by the police on a group of people arrested for begging in Westminster; 70% tested positive for crack cocaine or heroin. "Giving to people who beg is not a benign act without consequences," said a spokesman for Thames Reach. "We have even lost people through overdoses in situations where a significant portion of the money they spent on drugs came from members of the public giving loose change."

Wayne Morgan, 27, has been clean for two and a half years, after being on heroin since he was 14, he quickly migrated to mixing crack and heroin, a £700 a day habit. On a typical day in Piccadilly Circus, he could make between £300 and £400, mainly from tourists. Many others who begged with him at the time have since died of overdoses.

After checking himself into a rehabilitation clinic, he is now training to be a self-employed electrical insulator and is dismissive of people who give handouts to beggars: "People beg for a reason. It ain't for food or something hot to drink."

Thames Reach disputes the claim, often made by beggars, that they need cash to pay for a bed for the night, pointing out most hostels do not require payment. Neither are many beggars homeless, the charity says. A study revealed that only 40% of people arrested for begging in Westminster in 2005 were homeless.

The charity encouraged the public to engage with people begging on the street and to buy them food or a cup of tea. "Best of all, if you are concerned because you think they are sleeping rough, contact your local outreach team."

The charity denied accusations it was demonising homeless people. "Most people sleeping rough do not beg, and most people begging do not sleep rough. Although there are many rough sleepers with serious drug problems, the majority have not. Our overriding concern is to save lives. We want to help people to get off the street and into decent accommodation where they can get care and support."

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