



Accurate and respectful  
language

# HOW TO TALK ABOUT PEOPLE SLEEPING ROUGH

A guide for journalists, editors, civic leaders,  
commentators and content creators.

**SUPPORTED BY**

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# Acknowledgement

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We acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, sea, and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures and to their elders past and present.

# About this document

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This document was created by NT Shelter, the peak body for housing and homelessness in the Northern Territory. We advocate on behalf of organisations providing key frontline services to the many people across the Northern Territory who do not have access to safe, affordable, accessible or appropriate housing.

We strongly believe that all of us in public facing roles who work in government, media, business and community organisations, and who engage in public comment about people who are sleeping rough, have a responsibility to do so in a manner which is respectful and informed.

This guide has been developed to provide context behind the high incidence of people sleeping rough in our communities. Our intention is that by providing evidence-based information and context, we can all play a key role in working through the myriad challenges and opportunities in a manner that is not prejudicial or harmful to the wellbeing of those who find themselves sleeping rough.

We hope that this guide will reduce the risks of people sleeping rough being mischaracterised and vilified by providing options that can be less stigmatising and harmful.

## Why do people sleep rough?

The reasons are many and varied. Some choose to while many don't. Not all people sleeping rough need housing, but quite a lot do. Many are visitors from other communities while a sizeable number of people sleeping rough are from the local community. Many are here to receive medical treatment they can't get back in their home communities.

It is important to recognise that most people sleeping rough are not engaged in antisocial behaviour or problem drinkers. It is unfair to characterise all rough sleepers in this manner and it only creates further fear, tension, stigma, and discrimination in our communities.



# Language is important

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Sleeping rough is a particularly challenging and traumatic experience for many people. There is a reason that shelter is universally considered a basic human need. Without safe shelter, people sleeping rough are exposed to the elements, do not have a safe place for protection against danger, and lack many of the facilities and amenities necessary for healthy living such as a bed to sleep on, washing and laundry facilities, toilets, refrigerators, cooking facilities and equipment, furniture to store personal belongings – the list goes on.

It is especially important that we do not dehumanise the experience of sleeping rough. Words matter. In the same way that we should not refer to “the addict” but “the person experiencing addiction”, we should be equally mindful about how we describe the people sleeping rough and their experience.

Above all, as we have shown above, we should not make generalisations about people sleeping rough. The situation is as complicated and multifaceted, as are the circumstances of the various cohorts of people sleeping rough.



## DO SAY

- People experiencing homelessness
- The person sleeping rough
- People breaking the law and engaged in antisocial behaviour make us feel unsafe
- People who are problem drinkers
- People engaging in antisocial behaviour
- People sleeping in the long grass
- Some people prefer to sleep rough; others would prefer shelter
- Provide suitable accommodation and other services
- We need better 24/7 services for all Territorians – accommodation, toilets, meals, health, welfare



## DON'T SAY

- The homeless / The homeless man
- The itinerant / the rough sleepers
- Homeless criminals making us feel unsafe
- The homeless drinkers
- Antisocial behaviour long grassers
- The long grassers
- People choose to sleep rough
- Move people on
- Homelessness is affecting my business

# Rough sleeping, antisocial behaviour, and crime

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Many people sleeping rough have complex, multiple needs. We know that mental illness contributes to homelessness, and that people sleeping rough can experience adverse mental health outcomes. Many people sleeping rough have health conditions. There are also cohorts of rough sleepers with drug and alcohol or gambling addictions. Others may have significant trauma following experiences with domestic and family violence. A lack of resources, financial and other, places many people sleeping rough into highly vulnerable situations.

In recognising the complexities, we can go hard on the issues rather than on the people. Of course, there are instances of antisocial behaviour and crime across communities of rough sleepers just as there are in all other communities. We at NT Shelter want to see safe, thriving and connected communities free of crime and antisocial behaviour. We fully support the important work that is done by law enforcement agencies to keep our communities safe and to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour where it arises, regardless of accommodation status.

All Territorians have a right to feel safe. This includes people sleeping rough. While we recognise the need for appropriate and effective measures to enforce the law, we also need to see an appropriate level of investment in services that connect with people sleeping rough to help provide support pathways. There are two sides to the coin.