

# into a rich vein

Liam Houlihan

PROFESSIONAL beggars on Melbourne's streets can earn hundreds of dollars for just a few hours' work.

More than \$120 can be made in less than a day, a sum that rivals the daily earnings of professional workers such as nurses and teachers.

The *Herald Sun* spent three days begging on Melbourne's streets to see first-hand what our city's beggars make and how they are treated.

In one 6½-hour stint in the city, I made \$120.30.

Averaged over a year of 40-hour weeks, that is the same net income as a taxpayer on \$50,000 — more than the average Australian wage and much more than that of kindergarten teachers and childcare workers.

Police say begging is on the rise in the city. And so is use of threatening tactics to cajole money from passers-by.

Superintendent Mick Williams said the new type of beggars use harassment as a way to make money.

He said the new wave beggars, who he described as charlatans, just want easy cash and aren't in need.

"They are creating an atmosphere of fear on some streets in the city," Supt Williams said.

The *Herald Sun* investigation also revealed there is no shortage of work for those willing to ask for it.

I held a sign "Will Work For Money" during my first morning of begging in the city. Within 15 minutes there were jobs offers as a delivery driver, labourer and factory work.

After three days begging in the city, at Chadstone and in Chapel St, I collected \$206.30, a can of Diet Coke, a cigarette, a quarter-pounder and a *Sesame Street* doll.

The overwhelming majority of donors were young women and mums with small children.

Few middle-aged males or inner-city professionals donated. Donations ranged from 20c to \$5, with contributions of \$1 or \$2 common.

Previous estimates of what beggars earn have been much lower. The City of Melbourne website states: "Based on observations, a person begging for four hours might have received as little as \$3 or as much as \$32." I made \$52.95 in the first three hours.

An official study of begging in Melbourne by Hanover Welfare Services in 2000-01 found most beggars were on government benefits or pensions.

The unemployment pension would add more than \$10,000 to a beggar's yearly income.

The spotlight fell on Melbourne's beggars last month when mayoral candidate Gary

## Herald Sun

*Herald Sun* reporter Liam Houlihan spent three days on our city streets to report first-hand the growing issue of beggars.

This was in direct response to begging becoming a key political issue in the recent lord mayoral and council elections.

All money collected has been donated to the Salvation Army's Melbourne Central Life Centre for the CBD's homeless.

Morgan promised to clear beggars not just from the city, but all of Melbourne.

Last Friday, Supt Williams announced a pre-Christmas crackdown on beggars.

The blitz has transformed begging hot spots, including the Flinders St end of Elizabeth St once regarded as the beggars' golden mile. During three days on the street, I saw only one other active beggar.

Supt Williams said there was a more visible police presence as part of the crackdown.

He said police diverted beggars who genuinely need help to support services, while the "fakes" were arrested.

Supt Williams said police had prosecuted 116 beggars since January and issued hundreds of warnings.

But he said the public could help curb the problem by not giving beggars any money.

"They should also avoid eye contact with people and if they feel threatened, call the police," Supt Williams said.

But yesterday's beggars have become today's "cuckoos" — people who prey on the remaining beggars and try to rob their takings.

On Swanston and Elizabeth streets, I had two close calls with would-be beggars who noticed my collection and lingered nearby ready to pounce.

In both cases the men waited for a gap in passing foot traffic but left when crowds continued to pass.

As well as rivals, beggars have to be on the lookout for police. I was shut down twice by police and face a charge of "begging alms".

On my first morning, four police officers told me to move on after three hours begging that netted \$52.95.

On Sunday, I spent all day in the Bourke St mall and Swanston St before being moved on by police at 7.30pm.

On Monday, police charged me under the Vagrancy Act.

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**Booty:** Liam made \$120 in one 6½-hour stint in the city. Pictures: DAVID CAIRD

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