

Holiday season highlights social desperation in New Zealand

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3 January 2017

The Christmas holiday season has served to highlight the dire social conditions faced by increasing numbers of New Zealanders. Social agencies and charities reported being “swamped” this year by a record demand for food parcels and other essential items.

At the Auckland City Mission, thousands queued over the two and a half weeks before Christmas for parcels of basic necessities including meat, cereals, canned food, yoghurt and occasional treats. The City Mission is a prominent voluntary welfare provider, and its services are often overstretched during the holiday period.

On Christmas Day, the Mission typically provides meals for 2,000 people, prepared and served by 600 volunteers, and distributes 8,000 presents to needy children. This year, an Auckland cafe also put on a free meal for another 160 people struggling to make ends meet, including several who travelled from the outer working class suburbs of Papatoetoe and Manurewa.

Mission spokeswoman Diane Robertson said there had been 3,000 food parcels handed out between December 7 and 18, more than ever before. They had expected that number across the entire month of December. Around 125 food parcels were distributed on the first day of the Christmas period, compared to 39 last year. Families were queuing nightly outside the mission’s Hobson Street premises from 1 a.m.

“The reason really is that more people are in need,” Robertson explained. “Realistically we know families are just struggling so much and every year it just gets harder.”

Recipients go through a rigorous process to get a food parcel and are first seen by onsite government Work and Income (WINZ) staff to check whether they are entitled to welfare payments. Christmas gifts for children are a one-off and recipients’ details are

recorded.

The Mission depends on public donations. With more than 300 families queuing every day, a plea was issued for more donations to meet the demand, costing at more than \$1 million. Fundraising manager Alexis Sawyers said there was less to go around this year because donations had been sluggish while first time visitors “in desperate need” had increased.

Chrissie McKee, a west Auckland grandmother on her first visit to the mission told Fairfax: “I knew there would be a queue but I didn’t think there would be people sleeping here since 1 a.m. This is where [former prime minister] John Key needs to be.”

McKee and her husband can no longer work for health reasons and are caring for their five-year-old grandson. “Really, we’ve got about \$200 odd a week and we’re supposed to get by on that when we’re all in and out of hospital,” she said.

Former truck driver Gordon Brown lives in a \$590 per week rental house in west Auckland, splitting costs with his wife, son, friend Philip Hardy and his wife, step-daughter and nephew. Brown, who has an inoperable heart condition, said: “Each week we do have to choose between paying power bills or the doctor’s fees.”

Hardy said there was only \$36 from his benefit left to feed himself and his family, after rent.

The National Party-led government, which Key headed from 2008 until his resignation on December 5, has imposed harsh austerity measures. Tens of thousands have been pushed off benefits, forced into insecure work or left to fend for themselves. Thousands of jobs have been axed since the 2008 financial crisis, including mass layoffs in the public sector and state-owned companies.

Following decades of welfare cuts by successive

National and Labour Party governments, child poverty has soared. WINZ has reduced its emergency food grants by 28 percent over the past six years. Spokesman for the Council of Christian Social Services, Trevor McGlinchey, declared in June that “a ‘new normal’ of desperation to find housing, food and sufficient income to survive has emerged for many families.”

Last May, reports of people in Auckland living in cars made international news reports. In response, Te Puea Marae (Maori meeting house) in south Auckland opened its doors to accommodate 56 families over the winter. Marae chairman Hurimoana Dennis said the “tidal wave” of desperate requests to house parents and children “just bowled us right over.” A crowdfunding web page dedicated to the initiative raised more than \$90,000 in donations.

Housing costs are responsible for plunging more people into poverty. This is particularly acute in the country’s largest city, Auckland, where more than half the houses are now worth more than \$1 million, according to the *New Zealand Herald*. Rents are setting record highs. Median rents across all Auckland property categories are \$510 per week, having increased 21 percent over five years. Some 40 percent of the city’s population depends on rental accommodation.

While the country’s property bubble is a major source of profit for the ruling elite, it has imposed an immense burden of debt on working-class families. Three out of five homeowners have a mortgage, with a median value of \$172,000. According to the Treasury, household debt has risen by 26.2 percent in five years to a total of \$246 billion.

Nationwide, 42,000 people are homeless, equivalent to nearly one of every 100 people. The number of homeless people has increased by 19 percent since 2006.

The *New Zealand Herald* reported on December 22 that a group of Auckland families faced a bleak Christmas in cramped motel rooms at a cost to the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) of thousands of dollars each week. The tenants had been placed under the MSD’s emergency accommodation scheme while waiting for social housing.

Hazel Waipouri and her two granddaughters have been living in a single-bedroom unit at one motel for four months. “It’s terrible, traumatic, bad,” Waipouri

said. “We’re stuffed in one room, we’re all getting sick.”

In the regional centre of Tauranga, people have resorted to sleeping in public toilets as the city’s homelessness worsens. A report in December by the Tauranga Homelessness Steering Group found a lack of affordable housing to be a growing problem for low-income people. It noted that emergency accommodation for women and children is deficient and mothers fear losing their children if they admit to having nowhere to live.



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