

At least six dead in New Zealand hostel fire

Tom Peters
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At least six people, and reportedly as many as 10, have died in a fire that engulfed a hostel in New Zealand's capital Wellington shortly after midnight last night. Eleven people remained unaccounted for at midday. Four people were taken to hospital, one in a serious condition.

More than 90 people, many of them long-term residents, were reportedly staying at the four-storey Loafers Lodge in Newtown, near the city centre, when the fire broke out on the third floor at 12:25 a.m.

Gregory Mein, director of Loafers Lodge Limited, made a brief statement to *Stuff*, saying his thoughts were with the victims and their families and he did not know any more information.

Brendan Nally, deputy commander for Fire and Emergency New Zealand, has told the media it is too early to comment on the cause of the fire. He told the *New Zealand Herald* this morning that emergency workers were carefully searching through the damaged building, parts of which were difficult to access. There is asbestos present, which "adds an extra layer of complexity to the very difficult job our firefighters are doing."

Questions are being raised about whether the building had adequate safety standards.

Nally said if the building had had a sprinkler system, which it did not, "then the result would be way less than what we're dealing with now... My firefighters, the great COMCEN (communications centre) operators, wouldn't have had to go through the tragedy. We wouldn't have had people that are deceased, we wouldn't have had families that are missing loved ones."

According to *Stuff*, "Housing Minister Megan Wood said that Loafers Lodge had passed an inspection early this year, and that it met the requirements of the Building Act." It had a fire alarm, but one tenant, Simon, told *Newshub* that many residents had learned to ignore it because of frequent false alarms. A sprinkler was not required by law.

A resident who escaped from the third floor, Chris, told *Newshub*: "I'm worried about all the elderly people in there that ain't strong or fit enough to get out. It

would've been hard for them to get out of the building, especially on the top floors." Another man, Tala Sili, was forced to jump out of a window on the fourth floor onto a second-floor rooftop.

About 50 survivors have taken refuge at an evacuation centre in Newtown Park. Many lost everything in the fire.

Loafers Lodge was a microcosm of the social crisis affecting ever wider layers of the New Zealand working class. It was reportedly home to low-paid shift workers, including meat processing workers, hospital staff, as well as unemployed and elderly people unable to find affordable housing elsewhere. Wellington's median rent has gone up by 33 percent in the last five years and the cost of living crisis is becoming worse all the time, pushing more people into precarious housing and cheap hostels.

Murray Edridge, from the Wellington City Mission charity, told the *Guardian*: "A significant proportion of residents of the lodge are under our care. This is an absolute disaster. These are people who are inherently vulnerable anyway."

In recent years the hostel had received payments from the Ministry of Social Development on an ad hoc basis to provide "emergency housing" to homeless people. The Labour government has dumped thousands of families into repurposed hotels and boarding houses across the country, often in overcrowded conditions, due to the housing affordability crisis.

The ministry told *Stuff* it no longer used Loafers Lodge for this purpose, but it is clear that many of the residents were among the city's poorest and lived there for lack of any better options.

Deportee advocate Filipa Payne said the hostel was also being used by Prison Aid and Rehabilitation and the government to house people deported from Australia under draconian deportation policies. "This is a horrible tragedy that will affect people that have been placed there through a traumatic and barbaric system," she said. "It will affect families left in Australia who have already been through trauma and heartache."

Prime Minister Chris Hipkins visited the scene of the fire this morning and told reporters there would be “a number of investigations” into the tragedy. “For older buildings, there are fewer requirements than for newer buildings,” he said, adding that Loafers Lodge had passed its recent building inspection and was not required to have sprinklers. It was “too early” to say if these regulations would be reviewed.

Hipkins praised the work of firefighters and said “we’ve got work to do to update and upgrade some of the outdated equipment that Fire and Emergency rely on.” Last year firefighters held nationwide strikes over low pay, dangerous levels of understaffing and faulty equipment.

Home Owners and Buyers Association president John Gray told the *New Zealand Herald*: “Questions have to be asked... One would hope that a building that housed so many people would be subject to closer scrutiny for fire safety and protection measures.”

It is well-known that many buildings in New Zealand are unsafe and that government regulators have tended to downplay the crisis. After the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire in London, which killed 72 people, Radio NZ reported that in New Zealand “there is widespread industry agreement that most [multi-storey] buildings have weak points that could accelerate the spread of a big fire and shouldn’t have been signed off as compliant with the Building Code.”

Deregulation by successive governments and cost-cutting by building developers has resulted in a plague of “leaky buildings” and billions of dollars worth of damage. These processes also led to the disastrous collapse of the CTV building during the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, which killed 115 people, for which no one has been held accountable.



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