

New Zealand police given power to “move on” homeless people

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Late last month New Zealand’s National Party-led coalition government announced it would give police the power to issue “move-on” orders in town centres across the country to people as young as 14 years old.

The amendment to the Summary Offences Act will empower police to “move on” people who are displaying “disorderly, disruptive, threatening, or intimidating behaviour.” The new powers, however, go further than existing laws against disorderly conduct: move-on orders can be issued to anyone impeding access to a business, begging, rough sleeping, or attempting to “inhabit a public place.”

This is a major attack on the rights of the most vulnerable people in society. Presented as a necessary tool to maintain “public order” and “safety,” the new measures criminalise poverty and homelessness, which are part of a deepening social crisis produced by decades of austerity and pro-market restructuring.

Someone ordered to “move on” must leave any area for a specified time, up to 24 hours, and at a distance determined by an officer. The person will be warned not to return to the area without a reasonable excuse. The maximum penalty for breaching an order is a fine of \$2,000 or three months imprisonment.

Housing advocates and welfare groups have raised alarms over effective bans on homeless people in city centres, warning that this only displaces the problem and causes more harm.

The Council of Civil Liberties said the new law breached the basic right to freedom of movement. It added that ordering people to move on “whose greatest crime is that they have no money and nowhere to sleep... must surely count as cruel and degrading punishment, which is also forbidden by the New Zealand Bill of Rights.”

Despite government and media propaganda about

homeless people behaving in an intimidating manner, Radio NZ (RNZ) reports that public order and health and safety offence proceedings in Auckland were at a 10-year low in 2025, with just 39 proceedings in December 2025 compared to 168 in December 2015. Nationwide, there were 428 such proceedings in that month, compared to 1,663 ten years earlier.

Last November, Prime Minister Christopher Luxon told RNZ the Auckland CBD had to be “sorted out” because people did not “feel safe going into the central city.” He offered no evidence for this but made it clear business considerations were central, declaring: “We have a new convention centre, increasing cruise ships and the launch of the CRL (City Rail Link), and we have to make sure that the downtown city is working well and is a safe place for people.”

The head of Auckland’s central business association Heart of the City, Viv Beck, told RNZ that her organisation was “of the view that lying and sleeping is not something that is actually something you want to really see on your streets.”

Announcing the law change on February 22, Justice Minister Paul Goldsmith and Police Minister Mark Mitchell claimed the country’s main streets and town centres were “blighted” by disruption and disturbance, with tourist spots becoming places of “intimidation and dysfunction.” Mitchell declared that it will be left to police to decide whether a homeless person told to “move on” should receive any “support” from social welfare agencies.

In effect, those without housing are treated not as people who need support, but as criminals to be managed or removed. Rough sleepers in urban areas are presented as a threat not because of any proven wrongdoing, but because they starkly expose the widening gulf between rich and poor.

The reality confronting hundreds of thousands of people across New Zealand is stark. Housing costs are among the highest in the OECD relative to incomes, driven by decades of deregulation, property speculation, and the erosion of public housing stock. Successive Labour and National Party-led governments have prioritised the interests of landlords, developers, and financial institutions over the basic right to secure housing.

Homelessness has risen sharply in recent years, with Māori and Pacific communities disproportionately affected. The government has cut funding and tightened eligibility criteria for emergency housing, while waiting lists for public housing stretch into the tens of thousands. As a result, the number of people sleeping rough in Auckland doubled in the 12 months to September 2025 from 426 to 940.

Housing researcher Brodie Fraser, from the University of Otago, wrote in the *Conversation* on February 25 that rough sleeping is only the “tip of the iceberg”: the most common form of homelessness is living in uninhabitable housing, followed by sharing accommodation. She described New Zealand as an “outlier” internationally in that more than half of those experiencing homelessness are women, including mothers, because the welfare system does not provide sufficient support to prevent it.

This reality underscores the utter hypocrisy and cynicism of the opposition parties, Labour and the Greens, which have called the “move on” powers “cruel” and “despicable.” A group of 21 civic leaders in Wellington, led by Labour Party Mayor Andrew Little, has sent an open letter to Luxon declaring that moving on homeless people will do nothing “to address the issues that individual is dealing with, and in fact, potentially causes significant harm.”

Yet under the 2017–2023 Labour-Greens government, in which Little was a senior minister, homelessness increased dramatically. Official statistics show that the number of people in “severe housing deprivation” increased from 99,462 to 112,496 from 2018–2023. The number living without shelter surged by more than a third, from 3,624 to 4,965.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s 2017 election promise to fix the housing crisis by building 100,000 “affordable” homes was a fraud. By 2024 just 2,300 homes had been built under the Kiwibuild scheme, in

collaboration with private developers. They were priced at market rates beyond the reach of most working class people.

Labour’s promise to address the mental health crisis—a major contributor to homelessness—was equally hollow. The proportion of the population who accessed specialist mental health treatment dropped from 3.8 percent in 2018–19 to 3.4 percent in 2022/23, amid soaring demand.

Labour lost the 2023 election in a landslide precisely because of the worsening social crisis, which also included rising child poverty and dependence on foodbanks.

The crisis has become even worse in the last two years. The Luxon government is now telling working people that they must endure yet another painful increase in the cost of living, due to the US-Israeli war against Iran—a criminal, imperialist war that the NZ government supports.

Meanwhile the government—with Labour’s support—is diverting billions of dollars from social programs to double the military budget and to integrate the country into US-led war preparations against China.

In this context, the attack on homeless people is a warning of how the ruling elite will respond to any movement by workers against its agenda of austerity and militarism. Workers must prepare to fight back by building their own party, in opposition to the entire political establishment, based on a socialist program that will put an end to the capitalist system that produces poverty, homelessness and war.



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