Homeless people die in New Zealand winter

Tom Peters
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At least two homeless people died in recent weeks in New Zealand amid plummeting winter temperatures.

According to a report in the *Press* on August 7, a woman was found on the beach in New Brighton, Christchurch, by local resident Justine Balcar just before 4 p.m. on Saturday, July 25. That evening, Balcar and her husband brought the woman, Hayley, some food and then phoned emergency services, concerned that "she was possibly hypothermic."

Balcar said "Police turned up five minutes later and told us an ambulance was on its way." The woman died in hospital the following morning. The recorded temperature on the morning of July 26 was -4.3 degrees Celsius (24.26 F).

About a week later, at around 4.00 a.m. on August 3, a man in his early 40s was found dead on Cuba Street in Wellington. The *Post* reported: "He could not be revived and the cause of his death has been referred to the Coroner. He was understood to have been an occasional rough sleeper."

Snow fell in Wellington on August 4, a very rare occurrence for the capital city, which currently has no emergency night shelter for homeless people.

Salvation Army spokesman Joe Serevi told the *Post* that his organisation had distributed 10 donated tents to homeless people in Wellington in just one day. "They are so freezing," he said. "Some of them don't have a couple of blankets to warm them up."

In the first quarter of 2026 the number of people sleeping without shelter in Wellington was 163, up from 145 a year earlier.

On Reddit, a friend of the deceased Wellington man wrote that "he had a great heart and was born into a cycle of tragic chaos." They said, "A few days earlier another friend told me he tried to spend a night in a night shelter, and was told that all the night shelters in Wellington have been closed down."

The post, which received more than 1,500 upvotes in Reddit's r/newzealand forum, said New Zealand was "on a dark downward path" and denounced the National Party-led government's "brutal 'crackdown' on homeless people." Large numbers of homeless people have been barred from accessing emergency accommodation. Police have also been given new powers to issue orders to homeless people to "move on" from designated areas, even if they have nowhere to go.

These appalling deaths are the foreseeable and preventable outcome of the ruthless dismantling of social welfare, public healthcare and housing programs carried out by successive governments.

Dr Bruce Arroll, a general practitioner who treats homeless people at Auckland City Mission's Calder Centre, told Radio NZ on July 9 that the average age at which his patients die is 55 for men and 54 for women—about one-third below the country's overall life expectancy.

In an editorial on August 1 the *Press* noted that Christchurch charities had seen growing numbers of children and elderly people sleeping in cars, in parks and on the street. "Homelessness has been a problem in Christchurch for more than a decade, emerging in the post-earthquake era and coinciding with economic stress and housing shortages," it said.

An encampment of about 60 homeless people has been established in Bexley, one of the suburbs which were demolished and turned into a wasteland following the devastating 2011 earthquake. The city council has ordered the group to relocate by the end of February next year in order to make way for a planned nature reserve.

People living in the camp told the *Press* on August 9 that officials had not indicated where to go, saying it was not the council's problem.

Another homeless woman, Rachel, camped near the Holy Trinity Church in Christchurch, told the *Press* that

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she had left the southern town of Gore because she could no longer afford her rent. She had tried to get emergency housing from the City Mission in Christchurch but was told there was none available.

Last month, RNZ reported that homeless woman Caitlin McDonald died in Christchurch in May 2025, at the age of 47. She weighed just 51 kilograms and had "concurrent respiratory tract infections" as well as complications from a kidney transplant. Despite serious physical and mental health issues, she had been unable to access permanent housing.

Caitlin's mother Wendy Proffitt said: "Homeless people are treated like trash, like they don't matter. Every single person is of value. We all deserve a home, a roof over our heads, to be cared for, to be valued, to be respected."

With an election approaching on November 7 and widespread anger at the country's profound social crisis, the recent deaths prompted a certain amount of posturing from the opposition parties.

In parliament on August 5, Green Party MP Tamatha Paul referred to the Wellington man's death. She said: "[W]e used to believe in having a social safety net, where anybody who fell through the cracks because of predicaments outside of their control would be caught, but now we have such cruelty… the number of people who are told that it is their own fault that they are homeless is increasing, and they are denied same-day emergency accommodation and told to come back next week."

Labour MP Ingrid Leary added that she had heard of elderly people "having to choose between heating and eating. They are dying of cold and starving in their own homes."

Such statements are thoroughly cynical. The record shows that the entire political establishment is complicit in the homelessness crisis. During the 2017–2023 Labour Party-led government, which included the Greens, the total number of "severely housing deprived" people increased from 99,462 in 2018 to 112,496 people in 2023 (2.3 percent of the population). The number of hospitalisations for people recorded as homeless doubled from 971 in 2018/19 to 1,954 in 2024/25.

Whatever the outcome of the November election, the crisis will intensify. All the parties in parliament defend the capitalist system under which housing, like every other basic need, is subordinated to the interests of private profit. Under successive governments, property developers and landlords have amassed multi-million dollar fortunes by driving up housing prices and rents.

Both Labour and National are promising to double military spending in preparation to join US-led imperialist wars, which will be funded by gutting social programs, including public housing.

The fundamental right to decent, healthy housing for everyone will only be secured through the political fight by the working class for the socialist reorganisation of society.

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