

Cold hard streets still the only home for many Aucklanders

How many homeless are on the streets of Auckland and how is Auckland City responding to the problem? CHELSEA BURKE, PRISCILLA DUNCAN and JEMIMAH O'LEARY investigate.

The number of homeless in Auckland does not suggest a homelessness crisis, but there are still enough rough sleepers in the downtown area to cause concern.

The exact figures are hard to gauge because the homeless are constantly on the move, says a fundraiser for the Auckland City Mission, Mathieu Holt.

"It's hard to quantify, as it's a very transient population, and a group that doesn't want to be found," says Holt.

The statistics are not always accurate because it's hard to define who is considered homeless.

But the latest survey conducted by the Auckland City Mission found that there were around 450 homeless people in a 5km radius from Sky City. These numbers are likely to increase as the city grows rapidly.

Auckland City Council is faced with the difficult job of knowing how to respond to homelessness, especially since there is no clear message from the government.

Unlike the United States and England, New Zealand currently has no national legislation or policies relating specifically to homelessness.

City councils are often under pressure from the public to clear away homeless people from their downtowns. But the fact remains that the homeless have an inherent right to occupy public space.

In his article *Putting the Public Back into Public Space*, K Iveson describes public space as egalitarian, democratic and open to all.

The reality is that it tends to have strict rules of entry, where majority social groups determine who can be present in what areas at what times. This has huge implications for marginalised groups of society.

For instance, public squares and parks are often deemed off-limit areas for the homeless. Popular public opinion usually supports this idea even though it has been heavily criticised in academic literature.

Auckland's is one of only three local governments in the country to implement by-laws which appear to target the behaviours of the homeless.

These by-laws are criticised in the article *Towards Inclusion: Local Government, Public Space and Homelessness in New Zealand*, in which authors Penelope Laurenson and Damian Collins explained how by-laws can serve to exclude the homeless.

For instance, the inner-city liquor ban is discriminatory since homeless people generally cannot afford to drink in a bar or find private accommodation.

Another criticism from the authors of the article is that the council does not do a good enough job of providing cheap housing. The article states:

"Local authorities in New Zealand lag behind those in Western Europe in requiring developers to incorporate social or



A HARD LIFE: a photograph by Nathaniel J Cooke, exhibited as part of his Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2001.

affordable housing in new apartment blocks and residential subdivisions. The incorporation of social housing into new developments could help to address shortages of affordable housing, which are currently acute in Auckland."

Despite these criticisms, the council has been fairly pro-active in helping the homeless. The Homeless Action Plan was implemented last year and has been effective in raising awareness of the issues, according to spokesperson for the project, Betty MacLaren.

"From the money given by rates, \$135,000 has been earmarked for a three year period," says MacLaren.

The plan is an alternative one to 'moving on' the homeless and vagrants around Auckland city.

The on-going plan, which started in March 2007, has successfully completed a number of its objectives, including raising awareness by training front line staff who come into regular contact with the homeless.

City workers such as parks officers, ambassadors and parking wardens, who work in areas where homeless people often congregate, have carried out awareness and support information training through the council.

The city workers are then in a much better position to identify and refer support to marginalised people they come into contact with on a daily basis.

One method used by workers in their response to help the homeless, is giving out information cards that identify key aid services. The homeless then have contact details of outreach services available in times of need.

The training from the council for front-line staff is carried out every six months so it is kept up to date.

It is also reviewed at six monthly intervals using participant feedback as a major success indicator.

A second stage of the Homeless Action Plan is to provide a mobile after-hours outreach service and to improve access to

existing ones.

Health, drug and alcohol services are essential in helping the homeless rebuild their lives and move into permanent housing.

In providing better coordination of outreach services, the council hopes it will increase professional contact in the community with homeless people who do not usually access the services.

But it is difficult to judge the progress in these early stages, according to MacLaren.

"The outreach services have just commenced in March 2007 and it is too early to tell how effective the service is at present," she says. "There will be a follow-up in six months time to measure progress."

The main organisations involved in homelessness, the City Mission, the Methodist Mission and the Salvation Army have committed to hold regular meetings to discuss issues and solve problems through trends feedback.

Another council initiative is finding related community and government agencies to call on for money and resources. Some of these include the Auckland District Health Board, Ministry of Social Development, Housing New Zealand Corporation and the Department of Justice.

The teams will compile data and information on current outreach services available and approach the departments for financial support.

One of the main issues facing homeless people in Auckland City is the shortage of accommodation for people in crisis, especially for women, children and young people.

The not-for-profit organisations aim to work with the government in addressing the gaps by increasing the advocacy role for crisis accommodation.

Another initiative by the council is to introduce the *Big Issue* magazine in New Zealand.

The *Big Issue* is a magazine sold by homeless people in many countries around

the world, enabling them to earn some form of income.

The magazine combines current affairs journalism with writing on local and global social issues.

It campaigns on behalf of the homeless and is independent of any media group, political alliance or affiliation.

Aside from these council initiatives, charity groups also play an integral role in helping to provide services for the homeless.

The largest form of support for the homeless is provided by the Auckland City Mission, which provides an inner-city drop-in service for people during the day, but it is only open from 9am until 5pm.

Mission worker Mathieu Holt says the service also includes advice on what opportunities are available.

"It's a place to come and feel at home, get tea and coffee, and get advice," he says. "We can help people who want to get identification, a job or a benefit."

When the drop-in service is not open, homeless people are often left out in the cold, he says.

"The issue is complicated because identification is needed to get a benefit, a job and a home. Many of the people are not in the position to access any of these things," says Holt.

"It's a catch twenty-two situation, you need money for identification and without identification you can't get a job or a home."

Holt says many people assume that those living on the street choose to be there, but he believes they are simply ordinary people who have lost their way.

"It could literally happen to anyone, there are all sorts of reasons such as mental illness, or a huge trauma."

The mission employs social workers who comb the city looking for homeless people.

One social worker approached a man in Myers Park in the CBD and asked if he would like food or a shower.

When she lightly placed her hand on his shoulder, he broke down sobbing.

"It was the first time a human being had touched this man in two years," says Holt.