



NEW ZEALAND COUNCIL OF TRADE UNIONS  
*Te Kauae Kaimahi*

**Submission of the  
New Zealand Council of Trade Unions  
Te Kauae Kaimahi**

**to the**

**Cross Party**

**Inquiry into Homelessness**

**P O Box 6645  
Wellington**

**August 2016**

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## **1. Homelessness Inquiry: NZCTU Response**

- 1.1. The New Zealand Council of Trade Unions Te Kauae Kaimahi (CTU) welcomes the opportunity to submit to this Inquiry which seeks a political and parliamentary response to the growing numbers of homeless people in New Zealand.
- 1.2. The CTU represents working people in 31 unions. With a total combined membership of more than 320,000 members the CTU is one of New Zealand's largest democratic organisations. We acknowledge Te Tiriti o Waitangi as the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand and formally acknowledge this through Te Rūnanga o Ngā Kaimahi Māori o Aotearoa (Te Rūnanga) the Māori arm of Te Kauae Kaimahi (CTU).
- 1.3. The CTU stands for a society that is fair, that tolerates neither poverty nor the human and economic costs of high inequality of wealth and income, one in which diversity is valued and a society in which people are not disadvantaged by their gender or ethnicity. Principles that we measure our own policies against as well as those of others are fairness; participation; security; improving living standards; sustainability and sovereignty.
- 1.4. A commitment to adequate housing including a response to homelessness is a measure of what sort of society we aspire to and to our fundamental values. Safe housing and shelter is a human right which is a critical determinant of health and social wellbeing and is crucial for sustaining employment and participation in society. Safe and adequate housing is essential to all people and to the overall prosperity of the country.
- 1.5. The CTU speaks on behalf of union members and working people in making this submission. Two of our affiliates have also made responses to this Inquiry which cover their direct areas of experience and concern. The New Zealand Education Institute (NZEI) submission focuses on the correlation between healthy housing and children's ability to learn and live in dignity and how not having a home or living in poverty affects young children and their learning. The Public Service Association (PSA) submission focusses on the stress that staff in Housing New Zealand and the Ministry of Social Development are facing with exposure to higher levels of human want and need through increases in homelessness and high poverty rates.
- 1.6. In May this year, mainly through an intensive media focus, people in New Zealand were exposed to an in-depth sense of the housing crisis and the growing numbers of homeless people in New Zealand. The media interviewed families with young children sleeping in cars

and in caravan parks, in overcrowded situations in a way that had not previously been shown before. It also exposed that some homeless people are racking up untenable debt after having being referred to motel accommodation by Work and Income New Zealand.

- 1.7. It is now not at all uncommon for working people to be living in cars or garages because they cannot afford soaring rent prices on low and insecure incomes. Stories such as a couple and their two children living in their car at South Auckland's Bruce Pullman Park who were earning \$600 a week but could not afford South Auckland's rentals (of approximately \$500 a week) demonstrate the gap between income and living costs and the problems that families are facing.<sup>1</sup>
- 1.8. Though Auckland has been highlighted as having the highest rates of homelessness there are other regions and cities with deep pockets of housing despair and deprivation. The growth in homelessness is reminiscent of the deprivation of the 1930's depression.
- 1.9. The provision of housing and shelter is a fundamental human right with the provision of shelter widely recognised as one of the most fundamental needs for human beings. International human rights law recognises the right of every person to an adequate standard of living including adequate housing in Article 25 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.
- 1.10. Adequate shelter is protected through Article 11(1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). New Zealand ratified this international covenant in 1978 which recognises '*... the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions*'.
- 1.11. As New Zealand has ratified ICESCR, the NZ Government has a duty to respect, protect and fulfil the right to adequate shelter and housing. Ratification requires that the most vulnerable and disadvantaged receive assistance as a priority.
- 1.12. The CTU have recently contributed a submission to the Healthy Homes Guarantee Bill which is about reasonable standards of housing and regulatory mechanisms to deal with the poor standards of New Zealand's rental housing. This Inquiry considers another component of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.newshub.co.nz/nznews/the-hidden-homeless-families-forced-to-live-in-cars-2016051314#ixzz4GmZSR1zI>

the housing crisis with the aim of ensuring that as a society we are responding to human need and providing essential human protections.

## 2. The Inquiry Questions

2.1. Four questions raised by the Inquiry to which we respond are:

- To consider whether the official definition of homelessness needs updating and recommend accordingly;
- To assess the evidence on the current scale of homelessness: whether it is changing and how and what the causes of that change might be;
- To evaluate possible policy responses to homelessness including international best practice and recommend accordingly;
- To consider how homelessness is experienced by different groups in society and to evaluate policy responses that respond to that experience.

### 2.2. Definition of Homelessness

2.3. The use of the term homelessness has traditionally been thought of and used to refer to people sleeping “rough”- on streets, under bridges and in night shelters. It is now accepted that homelessness extends beyond this to families, individuals and people living in a much wider variety of unstable, temporary and unsuitable accommodation.

2.4. The Statistics New Zealand’s official definition of homelessness is commended as it goes beyond the traditional concepts of homelessness such as sleeping out and night shelters:

*“Homelessness is defined as living situations where people with no other options to acquire safe and secure housing: are without shelter, in temporary accommodation, sharing accommodation with a household or living in uninhabitable housing”.<sup>2</sup>*

2.5. An agreed definition of homelessness is essential so that well-informed decisions on the level and nature of homelessness in New Zealand are made from the same base and data and everyone is using the same method to ensure accuracy. An agreed and sufficiently

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<sup>2</sup> Statistics New Zealand (2009). *New Zealand definition of homelessness*. Wellington.

broad definition of homelessness is important to identify interventions and responses to those in need as well as look at the longer term solutions.<sup>3</sup>

- 2.6. Statistics New Zealand's definition notes that there is a likelihood that people without shelter, people staying long-term in motor camps and boarding houses, people sharing accommodation, and people residing in dilapidated dwellings may only be counted when in contact with a provider, agency or researcher. This results in undercounting and underestimation of the numbers of homeless people.
- 2.7. The definition of homelessness needs to be broad. There are some problems with the term "homeless" due to it being stigmatising. For this reasons housing researchers have advanced the use of the alternative term, "severe housing deprivation".<sup>4</sup>
- 2.8. While the focus on the definition of homelessness is important there needs to be caution about spending too much focus and time on a definition. The New Zealand Coalition to End Homelessness (NZCEH) warned against this saying spending too much time on this "*could perpetuate a sense of inertia in policy development and procrastination in strategic collaboration*".<sup>5</sup>
- 2.9. **Scale of Homelessness**
- 2.10. The second question that the Inquiry seeks to answer is the current scale of homelessness, whether it is changing and how and what the causes of that change might be. There is now, as the NZCEH identify, "*a greater willingness to view homelessness not in terms of individual deviance but as being related to wider social and economic issues which can be addressed through public policy*".<sup>6</sup>
- 2.11. The total number of homeless in 2013 was 41,075, or 1 per cent of New Zealand's population. Census data has verified the increase in the numbers of homeless people rising between 2006 and 2016 with homelessness in terms of both numbers and as a proportion of the population growing. Housing researcher, Kate Amore describes the upward trend "as accelerating between the 2006 and 2013 censuses, compared with the 2001 and 2006 period."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse\\_for\\_stats/people\\_and\\_communities/housing/homelessness-definition.aspx](http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/people_and_communities/housing/homelessness-definition.aspx)

<sup>4</sup> Amore, K, Viggers, H, Baker, M, Howden Chapman, P ( 2013) Severe Housing Deprivation: the problems and its measurement, official Statistics Research Series, Statistics New Zealand September 2013

<sup>5</sup> New Zealand Coalition to End Homelessness: Homelessness in Aotearoa: Issues and Recommendations, October 2008. P.10.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid P

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.otago.ac.nz/news/news/otago613529.html>

- 2.12. The impact of more people in insecure work and the relationship of insecure work to homelessness requires specific attention as a potential causative factor in increasing levels of homelessness.
- 2.13. Also requiring investigation is the impacts of the benefit reforms and whether the implementation of benefit sanctions by MSD on people who fail to meet benefit requirements is a causative factor in increased homelessness.
- 2.14. **Policy Responses to Homelessness**
- 2.15. International best practice and recommendations must be addressed by looking at the work already done on this question and the evidence already gathered. The strategic plan by the NZCEH provides a strong framework for solutions to end homelessness based on both a human rights perspective and a public policy approach. The strategy to achieve this aim covers seven action areas: policy framework; planning, prevention and early intervention, data collection; systems prevention, specialised service developer and long term solutions.
- 2.16. A public health approach to homelessness that focuses on interagency collaboration, the reduction of health inequalities and a focus on prevention such as the one developed by Amore provides a valuable tool for this Inquiry to use and base its recommendations upon.<sup>8</sup>
- 2.17. The NZCEH strategy recommended that the task of developing a Homelessness Strategy lies in agencies working collaboratively together but that a key agency should be identified to facilitate action, co-ordinate and give direction. This requires therefore a commitment from Government - currently not present.
- 2.18. The State has a crucial role in housing provision as affordable housing will not be a priority of private developers or landlords.
- 2.19. An end to homelessness and ensuring access to suitable and safe housing has to address the root causes of homelessness and not merely, as is happening at the moment, managing the worst symptoms of the problem with ad-hoc policy responses.
- 2.20. There is an urgent need for a national housing strategy. As well as the provision of new affordable housing this must include a response to reduce levels of homelessness. It is also

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<sup>8</sup> Amore, K (2008) A Public Health Approach to Homelessness, Housing Works, May 2008.

an issue affecting local Government and local Councils – a number of whom continue to provide social housing and housing support.

**2.21. Experience of Homelessness by Different Groups in Society**

- 2.22. The question of how homelessness is experienced by different groups in society and evaluate policy responses that respond to that experience is very important to identify because different groups do experience homelessness differently.
- 2.23. For working people a steep decline in housing affordability has led to many families becoming homeless as a result of financial hardship causing eviction or mortgage repossession.
- 2.24. The increasing employment insecurity and redundancies affecting working people play a role in financial hardship and housing unaffordability. There are reports from people working with beneficiaries in Auckland that 45 percent of the people seeking help are in employment or have recently been in employment.
- 2.25. In New Zealand many women become homeless as a result of domestic violence, as do their children, Women's refuges are increasingly stretched to accommodate the number of women and families seeking help while at the same time facing severe budget shortfalls.
- 2.26. People with mental health issues who are homeless experience greater disadvantage and social exclusion.<sup>9</sup> Unstable mental health makes it more difficult to maintain housing, employment and relationships. The impact of homelessness has been found to be worsened by alienation from the mental health system.
- 2.27. Mental health patients and their families have specialised housing needs and they are at much greater risk of homelessness. There are questions to be answered in this Inquiry about the diminishing role of state agencies in providing support for homeless people and for people with mental health conditions. For example some DHBs previously recognised and responded to the housing needs of people with mental health conditions and gave support to some community housing providers. Now cash-strapped DHBs are increasingly unwilling and unable to respond to housing advocacy needs or provide housing support.

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<sup>9</sup> Homelessness in New Zealand, Parliamentary Library Research Paper, July 2014.

### **3. The Inquiry Outcome**

- 3.1. We commend the political parties – Labour, Greens and the Māori Party for initiating this Inquiry. But it is deeply disappointing and concerning that the National Government does not recognise the need to work together on responses and solutions to this national crisis.
- 3.2. Much work has already been done on the problem of homelessness. There are identified solutions and there is common agreement about some of the approaches and solutions. But what is needed now is a political willingness to act on these agreed solutions and for a coherent long-term, cross party political strategy.
- 3.3. This Inquiry provides the opportunity to look at the work that has been done and to involve iwi, community and human rights organisations, unions, community leaders and NGOs to ensure that the solutions are adequate, durable and acceptable.
- 3.4. There is an urgent need for a national housing strategy which includes a comprehensive and targeted approach to reducing homelessness in New Zealand. Without this the numbers of homeless people will continue to increase.