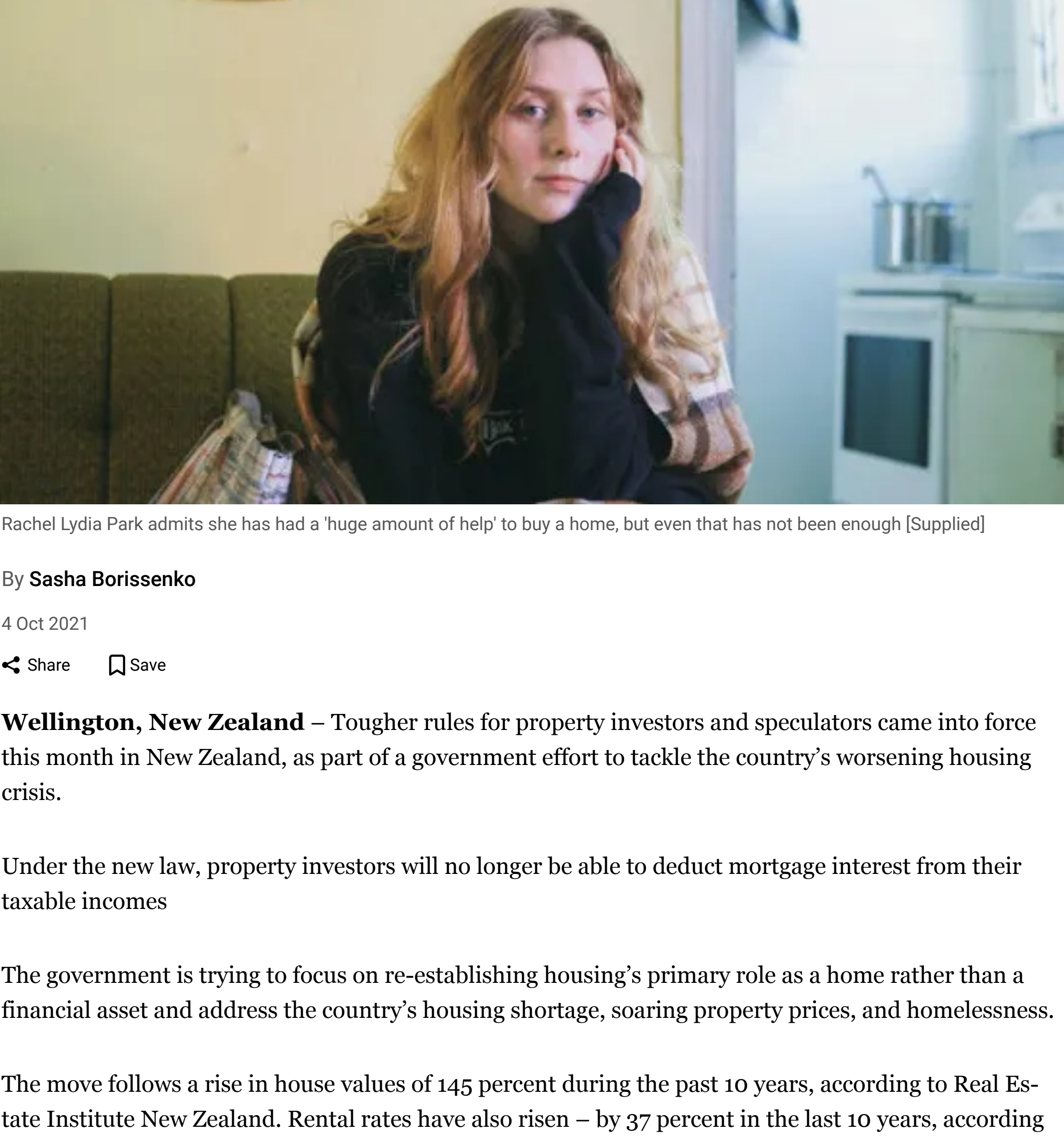


News | Housing

New Zealand: The struggle to find a ‘decent home’

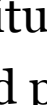
New rules to curb investment took effect this month, but the country’s human rights commission says successive governments have failed New Zealanders.



Rachel Lydia Park admits she has had a ‘huge amount of help’ to buy a home, but even that has not been enough [Supplied]

By **Sasha Borissenko**

4 Oct 2021

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Wellington, New Zealand – Tougher rules for property investors and speculators came into force this month in New Zealand, as part of a government effort to tackle the country’s worsening housing crisis.

Under the new law, property investors will no longer be able to deduct mortgage interest from their taxable incomes

The government is trying to focus on re-establishing housing’s primary role as a home rather than a financial asset and address the country’s housing shortage, soaring property prices, and homelessness.

The move follows a rise in house values of 145 percent during the past 10 years, according to Real Estate Institute New Zealand. Rental rates have also risen – by 37 percent in the last 10 years, according to Statistics New Zealand.

As of 2018, 42,000 people in the country were living without shelter, or in temporary or shared accommodation and Ministry of Social Development figures suggest more than 23,000 people are on the public housing register.

The dire situation has already attracted the interest of the Human Rights Commission, which in August announced plans to conduct a national inquiry into housing.

Chief Human Rights Commissioner Paul Hunt says over the last 50 years successive governments have failed the New Zealand public.

In the 1970s there was a Royal Commission of inquiry into housing, which led to the creation of a national housing council that was disbanded just 10 years later.

“Looking back this was an important body that had oversight of the growing problem,” he said. “We took the eye off the ball and left everything to market forces.

“The Human Rights Commission doesn’t favour a public or private approach – that’s for the government of the day to decide, but whatever approach is chosen it must deliver and in recent years there’s no doubt whatsoever it has failed.”

Traditionally, New Zealand has been active in drafting international human rights law – including the right to a decent home – but it has not been so good at bringing those rights back home, he says.

“These treaties have been ratified, so they’re legally binding but somehow there’s an attack of amnesia when politicians and officials fly back home over the Pacific,” he said.

“The right to enjoy a safe, secure, decent home is critically important for wellbeing. Without a decent home, it’s very difficult for people to be active members of society.”

Al Jazeera spoke to some New Zealanders about their experience of finding a home.

Jim



Jim, who suffered a life-changing injury that left him unable to work, found himself on the streets [Sasha Borissenko/Al Jazeera]

Jim* was living on the streets of Wellington, New Zealand’s capital when Al Jazeera spoke to him. He had been homeless for more than two weeks but was hoping to move in with family in another part of the country.

Jim has been on sickness benefit since he was hit in the back of the head with an axe five years ago, he says. He does not remember the circumstances leading up to the accident other than waking up in a hospital where he was told he was lucky to be alive.

He has been in and out of public housing since the accident, but securing permanent financial help has proved difficult because his head injury means he will never be able to work.

Jim found himself without a roof over his head after a stint in a halfway house came to an end.

It was his first time on the streets, but he said people tended to be helpful – providing food, daily showers, and the homeless community had been welcoming.

“You really just want to be left alone and not harassed. I’m taking it day by day. I’ve got good shoes, a blanket, and I’m as comfortable as I can be.”

Benjamin Duyvesteyn

Engineer Benjamin Duyvesteyn, 25, moved to Raglan on New Zealand’s North Island for a two-year stint but in April 2020 when his relationship with his brother deteriorated, he moved into a tent.

Working a number of odd jobs and with no rooms available in Raglan, he says, it made more sense to live in a campground for 15 New Zealand dollars (\$10.40) a night than to move to Auckland, the country’s biggest city, and pay between 200 and 250 New Zealand dollars (\$138.65 and \$173.33) a week to live in what he describes as a “shoebox”.

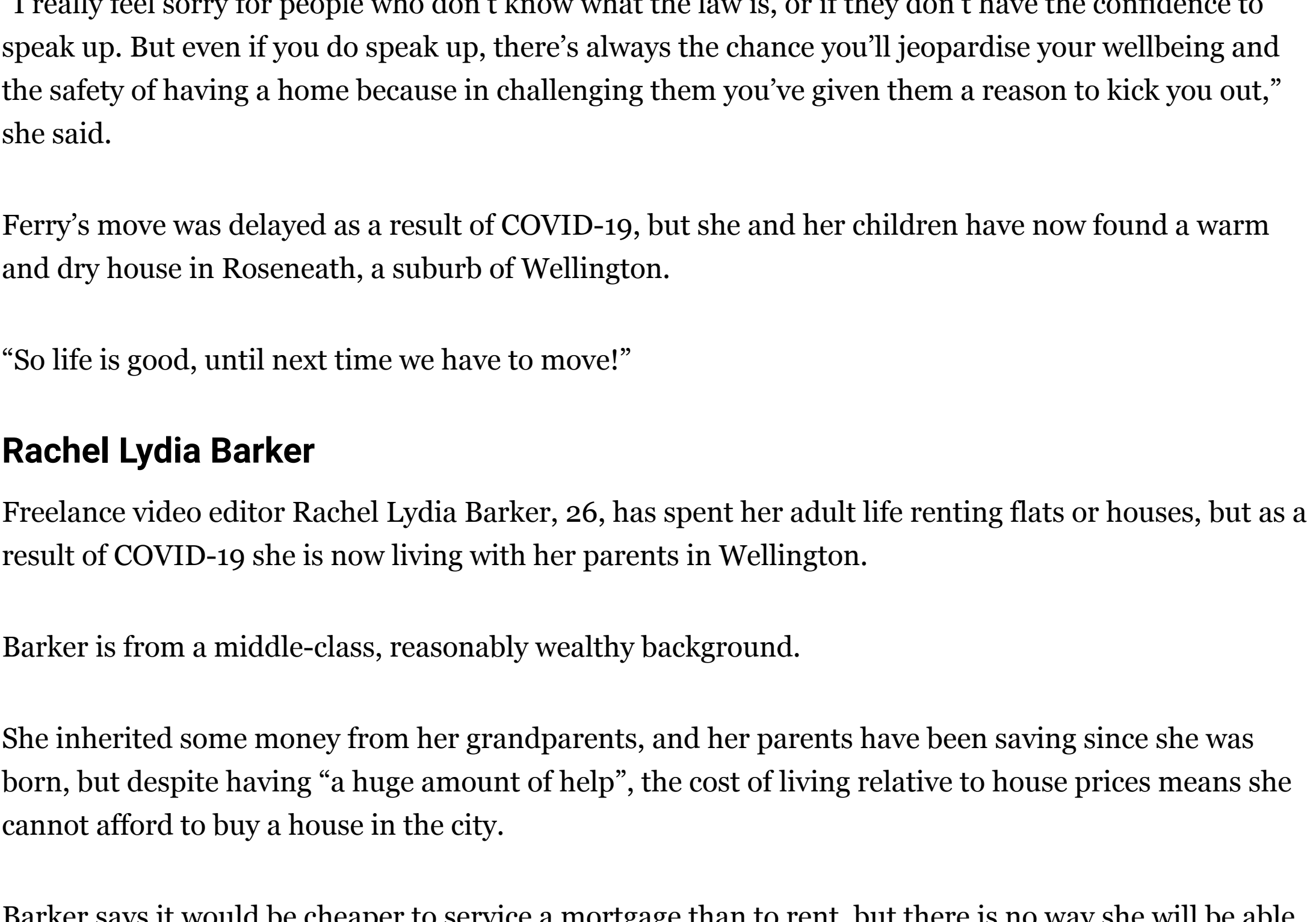
Duyvesteyn ended up living under canvas for 10 months.

“It wasn’t great. I’ve definitely had better times in my life,” he told Al Jazeera. “The campground didn’t have any washing equipment or hot water. It was freezing over winter. I would use a laundromat in town to wash my clothes. I’d use a battery pack to charge my phone. If it rained I wouldn’t be able to get dry before going to bed.

“There were rats the size of cats. Once I found a rat inside my tent so that’s why I would basically live out of the supermarket and buy each meal each day. But it was something I had to do. I was working full time so it meant I saved a bit of money.”

Duyvesteyn moved in with friends in early 2021.

Kelly-Jayne Ferry



Kelly-Jayne Ferry says the search for a new home was a ‘sobering’ experience [Ruth Hollinsworth/Ruth Holly Photography]

Kelly-Jayne Ferry and her two daughters had been living in the Mount Victoria area of Wellington, the capital, for three years when their property manager gave them 42 days notice that the lease would not be renewed.

“I’m very sad to leave our home,” Ferry told Al Jazeera. “After renting for so many years I’m left with this constant lingering fear at the back of my mind that we might have to move again soon, which has meant I’ve never really invested in making a place nice.

The search for a new place that is suitable, affordable, and close to the girls’ school has been sobering, she says.

“The lack of cohesion between pricing and quality has blown me away,” Ferry told Al Jazeera. “It’s depressing. You may view a house where the paint is peeling, the walls are filthy, and nothing’s been done to it for 50 years, and with little sunlight. And then you view a place that’s a beautiful ocean view apartment and it’s the same price. Where’s the line, and how does that work?”

Ferry found few properties available and that what was on offer was generally designed for young professionals who were able to pay up to 300 New Zealand dollars (\$208.89) per week for a room in a house or tiny apartment.

Landlords will often push the limits of what they can get away with, Ferry says.

“I really feel sorry for people who don’t know what the law is, or if they don’t have the confidence to speak up. But even if you do speak up, there’s always the chance you’ll jeopardise your wellbeing and the safety of having a home because in challenging them you’ve given them a reason to kick you out,” she said.

Ferry’s move was delayed as a result of COVID-19, but she and her children have now found a warm and dry house in Roseneath, a suburb of Wellington.

“So life is good, until next time we have to move!”

Rachel Lydia Barker

Freelance video editor Rachel Lydia Barker, 26, has spent her adult life renting flats or houses, but as a result of COVID-19 she is now living with her parents in Wellington.

Barker is from a middle-class, reasonably wealthy background.

She inherited some money from her grandparents, and her parents have been saving since she was born, but despite having “a huge amount of help”, the cost of living relative to house prices means she cannot afford to buy a house in the city.

Barker says it would be cheaper to service a mortgage than to rent, but there is no way she will be able to save enough money for a deposit. “Of course I’d prefer to pay off a mortgage than be paying the same amount in rent with the possibility of being displaced at any point.”

She is planning on going to Australia to join her sister, who has just bought an apartment in Melbourne. Barker’s sister realised she would earn substantially more abroad and after two-and-a-half years, in addition, to help from her family, she secured a deposit.

“My parents are pretty heartbroken. They’re English and decided to move to New Zealand for a better quality of life. I was eight at the time and New Zealand used to be a haven. It still is in many ways but the cost of living is increasingly similar if not more than cities such as New York or London – and without some of the perks those cities have to offer.”

Nigel Mander



Nigel Mander has led a transitory life but has no regrets. He says attitudes around housing need to change [Sasha Borissenko/Al Jazeera]

Nigel Mander, a former professional clown in his sixties, has been renting since his mother passed away 12 years ago.

After travelling the world, he moved into a derelict shop and lived there for five years. “I didn’t publicise it too much as I didn’t want to get offside with the [municipality]. There was wiring and water damage, the roof leaked, but it was cheap and it worked until the owner chucked me out.”

Ever since Mander has led a transitory life moving from house to house at the mercy of various landlords and friends, but he says he has no regrets.

“My living situation hasn’t been very stable and it’s left me with underlying feelings of insecurity but I don’t let it get me down. I tend to throw caution to the wind and I press on regardless. I’ve never been much of a saver and I’ve travelled extensively.

“We need to change people’s attitudes around housing. It shouldn’t be about owning your own castle or having properties as investments, but rather if you’ve got a spare room or a spare house, there might be people – and lonely people who could use the company – who would be grateful for the accommodation. The community aspect is lacking, I think.

“There are certainly enough houses to go around, but when greed comes into play, where people decide to own 20 houses or to keep them empty because it’s less hassle than renting them out, that’s what I have a problem with.”

Murdoch Stephens



Murdoch Stephens has been in rented accommodation for more than 20 years and says everyone has been ‘short-changed in New Zealand’s housing market [Sasha Borissenko/Al Jazeera]

Writer Murdoch Stephens, 40, has been living in rented accommodation since he was 18.

In the spring of 2019, he was sharing a flat in Mount Victoria – one of Wellington’s wealthier suburbs – with five others when the area made headlines after being infested with “monster rats”.

At the time he was having challenges with the flat – rent had increased by 18 percent and there were infrastructural issues, but he could not get in touch with the landlord. It became a joke that perhaps the landlord was a giant rat living in the garden, which became the premise for his book, Rat King Landlord.

“What we don’t talk about are the subtle consequences of the housing crisis; people staying in relationships that they shouldn’t for fear of changing their living situation, or fragmented communities because people are shuttling from suburb to suburb, for example.

“As a writer, you don’t make much money at the best of times, but I particularly worry about younger people who increasingly don’t have the opportunity to pursue creative careers because the cost of living means it’s not an option.”

Stephens is not interested in disparaging landlords, politicians, or personalising the issue. The housing problem is structural and will take a paradigm shift in thinking to fix, he says.

“Everyone is short-changed in this environment. We don’t have the language to change it or any language that articulates a collective response.”