

Now Auckland Wants to Fine Homeless People for Begging

By **Sasha Borissenko**

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Auckland’s homeless could soon be hit with fines. The move comes after complaints about people defecating in public areas, harassing residents and tourists, washing in fountains, and trampling flower beds.

The council’s Regulatory and Bylaws committee has just passed changes to the Public Safety and Nuisance Bylaw, which must be approved by the Government to take effect. The fines will be handed out if people are judged to be begging in “an aggressive or intimidating manner”.

In the past six months people asking for money on the street have breached the public safety and nuisance bylaw on average **466** every month. Two of the city’s homeless have breached the controversial bylaw almost 400 times in the past two years alone, making up a chunk of the statistics by themselves.

Auckland’s crackdown on the homeless comes just after Wellington considered and threw out a similar proposal. A report ***Begging in Wellington*** also considered outlawing begging altogether. But, there was little evidence to suggest such measures worked in other parts of the world.

The research unsurprisingly found that homeless people asking for money suffer from addiction, criminal convictions, and fragile or non-existent support networks. Begging is influenced by wider government policy decisions—in particular access to social services. The study thereby concluded that local councils have a duty, while limited, to reduce begging by other means.

While the only available research around the total number of homeless in New Zealand dates back to 2006, there were 34,000 severely housing deprived in 2006. That accounts for nearly one in 120 New Zealanders.

Wellington City Council principal media advisor Richard MacLean says after considerable debate the council concluded that criminalising people who give or beg for money outright would be counterproductive to solving the problem. But they’re watching what happens in Auckland with interest.

Auckland Council Regulatory and Bylaws Committee chair Calum Penrose says everyone has to come together to solve what is “a multi-faceted issue.” Homeless people are on the streets for a raft of reasons. The idea behind fining people, even if they have no money, is to get them into the system so that they can access other services, says Penrose.

“It’s a real challenge but we have an overarching obligation to protect the welfare of all residents. That includes the homeless too.”

But homeless advocate Michelle Kidd of The Rangimarie Charitable Trust says fining people begging on the street is both an oxymoron and ridiculous. She calls homelessness a health issue, not a police one.

“It’s nonsensical to fine somebody who is already in such a desperate situation. Not only will we be more or less a police state, we are not addressing the real issues of poverty, substance abuse, mental illness, lack of healthcare for these individuals, not to mention a lack of love.”

Michelle refutes claims that begging takes advantage of Auckland’s residents saying you only need to look at the state of their health, clothing, and attitudes to know how desperate they are.

“You are not homeless and begging for no reason, you are homeless because something has gone badly wrong in your life,” says Kidd.

VICE spoke to a homeless woman in Auckland to get her reasons for begging. Diana has lived on and off the street since she was a teenager, and is missing her two front teeth after getting punched by an ex. She has five children who are grown up, but Diana has no idea what they look like. According to her they probably know she’s homeless.

“I’ve had a pretty sad life,” she said. “But there are people in much worse situations. I’m addicted to booze and cigarettes but none of the hard stuff. I don’t live to have fun. I don’t live to have sex. I don’t live to have food or make money. I wouldn’t know how. Look at me. I don’t live to do anything. I just live.”

Passers by and the “streetie” community can be very kind, she says. “It doesn’t make sense to get into trouble by asking for people to help. No streetie has any money, that’s why we have to ask people for it.”

She uses the money she gets from begging to pay fines, go to the doctors, buy food, alcohol, cigarettes and she says tries to give a few dollars to the Red Cross when she can.

“I may be hard to look at but I’m also a caring person. If anyone else thinks differently it’s their problem. I’m just doing my thing. I don’t know what a proper life is.”

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