In 2002 the Diet passed Japan’s first ever law specifically dealing with homelessness, the ‘Homeless Self-Reliance Support Law’ (Hōmuresu Jiritsu Shien-hō). The theme of ‘supporting self-reliance’ (jiritsu shien) has become very prominent in Japanese social welfare policy in recent years. I argue that ‘self-reliance’ is a gendered term, underpinned by sexist assumptions that men are self-reliant while women and children are dependent. This is the ideological landscape that has gendered homelessness in Japan, to the point where most surveys indicate that 95%+ of homeless people are men. I use a qualitative approach to look in some detail at four homeless men from various Japanese cities: their personal background, personality, and modes of dwelling and livelihood. I conclude that some homeless men at least are surprisingly self-reliant, and that their gambling, hard-drinking lifestyles embody a mode of masculinity ultimately derived from Edo era commoners and expressed in words like iki and kaisō. I further argue that the policies carried out under the new law may have the ironic effect of making homeless men more dependent upon the state, by gradually outlawing a kind of self-reliance that does not match the hegemonic model.