



Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness

Executive Summary

Still on our streets...

Results of the 2008 Metro Vancouver Homeless Count

September 16, 2008

Introduction

This executive summary is designed to provide readers with a summary of the results of the 2008 Metro Vancouver Homeless Count conducted on March 11, 2008. Readers who are interested in the results beyond what is provided here should consult the final report which is available on the Metro Vancouver website.

The 2008 homeless count was aimed at providing an updated estimate of the number and scope of homelessness in Metro Vancouver — the demographic profile as well as trends — in the homeless population since the 2002 and 2005 counts.

The count covered all Metro Vancouver municipalities, except Bowen Island, Anmore, and Belcarra, where local representatives contacted before the count suggested that there were no locations where the homeless either congregated or could be found.

Definitions

For the purposes of the count, an individual was considered to be homeless if they did not have a place of their own where they could expect to stay for more than 30 days and did not pay rent. This included people who had no physical shelter, who for example stayed on the street, in doorways, in parkades, in parks, on beaches, as well as those who were temporarily sheltered in emergency shelters, youth safe houses, or transition houses for women and their children fleeing abuse. People who stayed at the home of a friend, commonly referred to as “sofa surfers,” were also considered to be homeless and included in the count, provided they had no security of tenure and did not pay rent.

The terms “unsheltered” and “street/service homeless” are used interchangeably to refer to homeless people who, on the day of the count, had no physical shelter and stayed on the street, in alleys, doorways, parkades, parks, on beaches, or sofa surfed. “Sheltered” homeless also refers to homeless people who sought shelter on the night of the count in emergency shelters, youth safe houses, or transition houses for women and their children fleeing abuse.

Count Methodology

The count used the “point-in-time” methodology in which all the people who are homeless on a given day are counted. This approach is the preferred approach to counting homeless people across North America. The approach contrasts with a “period relevance” count in which the

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number of people who are homeless over a longer period of time are counted. For this count, the point-in-time chosen was the 24-hour period beginning at 12:01 am to 12:59 pm on March 11, 2008.

In recognition of the fact that some homeless people would be sheltered on that day while others would not, a two-part counting process was adopted. The first part involved the enumeration of all shelters, youth safe houses, and transition housing for the night of March 10/11. This provided an estimate of the “sheltered” homeless. The second part involved the enumeration of locations around Metro Vancouver where homeless people were known to be found, between 5:30 am and midnight on March 11. These locations included meeting or congregating areas, and meal and program/service venues. This component also generated a count of the “street/service” homeless.

Count Limitations

The key limitation of the count is that by its very nature, the point-in-time methodology underestimates the number of homeless people. For that reason, the results should not be construed as a full accounting of the Metro Vancouver homeless population. Some of the challenges in finding homeless people in the region include the difficulty of reaching homeless people who do not use homeless services (such as shelters and meals). That being said, the information provided in the report offers the best available estimate of homelessness in the Metro Vancouver region, and is based on approaches used in previous counts and by other Canadian and US jurisdictions.

General Results of the Count

The combined results of the enumeration showed that on March 11, 2008, there were 2,660 homeless people in the Metro Vancouver region. This does not include 402 people who were “perceived” to be homeless but not included in the total count because they either refused to be interviewed for the purposes of the enumeration, or were asleep and couldn’t be woken up.

Of the 2,660 people counted, 1,574 or 59% were unsheltered, slept rough, or sofa surfed on the night of the count, while 41% or 1,086 were sheltered in emergency shelters, safe houses and transitional houses.

Table 1: Sheltered and Street Homeless in Metro Vancouver, March 11, 2008		
Homeless Category	Number Homeless	Percentage
Sheltered Homeless	1,086	41%
Street Homeless	1,574	59%
Total	2,660	100%

The following paragraphs set out some of the key findings from the count.

Highlights of the Count

- ❖ **Growing homelessness across Metro Vancouver:** — There has been a significant growth in the number of homeless people in Metro Vancouver since the last count in 2005. While the number of homeless people in the region as a whole grew by 22% (2,174 to 2,660) from the 2005 count, some suburban municipalities saw 100% or more growth. The largest percentage growth occurred in the Tri-Cities (140%), followed by Burnaby (110%) and Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows (102%)
- ❖ **Homelessness is region-wide and home-grown:** — Approximately three out of every four (74%) homeless person was found in Vancouver and Surrey. Yet, less than half (48%) of those counted called the two communities “home.” Vancouver was “home” to 37% of the homeless, while Surrey was “home” to 11%. Approximately 23% of the homeless called other municipalities in the region “home”, while 29% named places outside the region as “home”, including other parts of Canada (18%), the rest of BC (9%), and even places outside Canada (2%).

While the absolute number of people who called Vancouver and the elsewhere in Canada “home” increased the most from the 2005 count (143% and 127% respectively), the relative growth in the point of origin of the homeless was highest in Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows (148%), followed by West Vancouver (120%), Richmond (113%), and outside Canada (88%).

- ❖ **Street homelessness increased significantly:** — The number of homeless people who went without shelter on the night of the count increased by almost 450 people from 2005. In percentage terms, the share of the street homeless rose from 52% in 2005 to 59% or 1,574 individuals in 2008. In addition, three out of four of those enumerated slept in locations that are not considered fit for human habitation, such as on the street, in public buildings, in parks, in cars, and in other public spaces.
- ❖ **Reasons street/service homeless did not stay in a shelter:** — About 32% of the street homeless population indicated that they did not stay in a shelter on March 11 because they disliked shelters. Reasons given for disliking shelters included bed bugs, cleanliness, restrictive rules, noise, theft, and limits on how long they could stay. At the same time, 261 people or 19% of those enumerated tried to stay in a shelter bed on the night of the count, but were turned away for various reasons. Another 17% were in institutions such as jails, hospitals, recovery houses, and overnight drop-in service centres. Only 2% expressed a preference to sleep outside.
- ❖ **Men continue to dominate the homeless population but homelessness among women is rising faster:** — Men continue to make up a higher percentage of the homeless population than women, with 72% compared to 27% respectively. The number of women who were homeless increased by 16% from 2005, compared to an increase of 13% among men.

- ❖ **Homeless population is ageing:** — Like the general Metro Vancouver population, the homeless population is also ageing. The median age of the homeless people counted on March 11 was 41 years, compared to 38 years in 2005. More significantly, between 2005 and 2008, the proportion of the homeless population aged 45 years and over increased by 42%, and rose from 31% of the total homeless population to 38%. During the period, the number of homeless aged 45 to 54 increased the most (49%), followed by the 55 to 64 year old group (30%).
- ❖ **Aboriginal homelessness is still high and growing:** — While people of Aboriginal ancestry represent only about 2% of the region's census population, they comprised 32% of the region's homeless population on March 11, an increase from 30% in 2005. This is consistent with the fact that homelessness within the Aboriginal population grew at a much faster rate (34%) than within the general homeless population (21%).

Also, the incidence of street homelessness was higher (73%) among people of Aboriginal ancestry than among the general homeless population (59%). As well, almost half (45%) of the homeless women counted reported Aboriginal identity, while two out of every five (41%) of the unaccompanied homeless youth were of Aboriginal descent.

- ❖ **Youth homeless continues to be difficult to track:** — 364 individuals under 25 years of age, including 270 unaccompanied youth were counted.
- ❖ **Long-term homelessness has grown significantly:** — Long-term homelessness increased by 62% from 2005, with 1,017 individuals or 48% of the homeless population found to have been homeless for at least one year. In comparison, 35% of the homeless reported being homeless for one year or more during the 2005 count. Long-term homelessness also affected a broad spectrum of the homeless population, including 56% of the street/service homeless, 34% of people with Aboriginal ancestry, and 24% of all homeless women.
- ❖ **Rising incidence of complex health problems:** — Approximately 84% of the homeless reported at least one health condition, including many disabling conditions such as addiction (61%), mental illness (33%), and physical disability (31%). Compared to 2005, there was a 47% increase in the number of homeless people with at least one health issue. While 35% of the homeless reported two or more health problems in 2005, 53% indicated multiple health problems in 2008.
- ❖ **Almost half of homeless receives income assistance:** — Almost half of the homeless population (43%) identified income assistance as their major source of income, an improvement over the 30% of the homeless people who were able to access income assistance in 2005. Despite having access to welfare, they still cannot afford a place to rent in the region.

Implications of the Results

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As an added value to their work, the count consultants assessed the significance of the count results and identified a number of policy, planning and research implications for consideration as part of any broader effort to develop and implement lasting solutions to address homelessness in the Metro Vancouver region. The following section summarizes the key implications.

Policy and Planning Implications

- ❖ The 22% growth in the homeless population represent a significant growth in the region's homeless population, and suggests that while much has been done in recent years to stem the growth in the number of homeless people and address their needs, much more needs to be done in the provision of additional shelter spaces and new permanent supportive housing units.
- ❖ The growing level of homelessness in the suburban areas of the region provides a continued rationale and perhaps an impetus for municipalities and the provincial government to work together to address the homelessness.
- ❖ Although more homeless people are accessing income assistance, and almost half of the homeless rely on it for part of their income, the shelter component of the assistance is still insufficient to cover the cost of housing in the region.
- ❖ The high incidence of self-reported and perceived addiction among the street/service population may suggest that addiction is a significant barrier to shelter. Consideration should therefore be given to augmenting existing low-barrier housing options, and in the process developing both dedicated facilities and scattered sites that can provide housing to people with addiction issues as part of a "harm reduction" or "housing first" approach.

Research Implications

- ❖ There appears to be a correlation between the rising median age of the homeless population and the increasing level of long-term homelessness. Future research could focus on the chronically homeless sub-population to better understand the factors and dynamics that are contributing to their plight, and also to identify potential solutions that the population can identify with.
- ❖ As an increasing proportion of homeless people are experiencing health problems, additional research could be conducted at the key health facilities used by the homeless to get a better understanding of the population's health needs.
- ❖ On average, the street/service population was homeless longer than the sheltered population, suggesting that the longer people remained homeless, the more likely they were to move out of the shelter system. At the same time, the sheltered homeless were more likely to have been in the municipality where they were found for a shorter period of time than the street/service homeless population. Future research could look into the pattern of homelessness in the region and examine whether the sheltered homeless are cycling out of homeless shelters, or whether they are moving to the street with time.

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- ❖ The proportion of Aboriginal people was higher among the street homeless than the sheltered homeless, suggesting that Aboriginal people who are homeless either avoid shelters, the shelters do not serve the Aboriginal population well, or the population is under-reported in the sheltered homeless data. Future research could focus on gaining insight into why homeless Aboriginal people are not accessing shelters as much, and to determine what can be done to increase their access to homeless programs and services.