

2008 METRO VANCOUVER REGIONAL HOMELESS COUNT Q & A

The 2008 Homeless Count took place on the night of March 10th and during the daytime of March 11th, 2008 throughout the Metro Vancouver region. The data tables provided in your media kit breaks down the information by Sheltered and Street/Service homeless. The 'Sheltered homeless' includes those individuals who were counted in an emergency shelter, safe house or transition house on the night of March 10th. The 'Street/Service' homeless (referred to as 'street' homeless in previous counts) includes those individuals who were counted on the street and at service location on the day of the count, and who did not stay in an emergency shelter, safe house or transition house the previous night.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 2008 PRELIMINARY RELEASE OF INFORMATION

1. The numbers being released today are preliminary numbers only

The data released today includes preliminary numbers only. The homeless count is a 24 hour snapshot of homelessness in our region. In releasing the preliminary count information shortly after the count we are responding to the intense interest in the homeless count from both the media and general public. A full analysis of the report will be completed by SPARC BC and is anticipated for release in September of this year. This will include information on such things as aboriginal representation among the homeless, mental health and addiction issues, length of time homeless, health services used by this population and other demographic information.

2. The methodology of the count

With each count our methods are getting better and we have been able to contact more of the people who are homeless in the region. Our count remains an undercount, but it is getting closer to the absolute numbers. We had no intention of creating a number; our interest was in conducting the count consistently with previous years and to speak with as many people as we can in a consistent basis. The undercount of our results are partially demonstrated by the 398 individuals 'perceived' as homeless on count day, who are not included in the preliminary count numbers.

3. Homelessness remains an issue in every sub-region of Metro Vancouver

2008 Count data shows an increase in the number of homeless individuals found in Metro Vancouver over 2005 data. This is reflected in every one of our sub-regions from the Northshore, Tri-cities, Vancouver, New Westminister/Burnaby, Surrey/Delta/White Rock, the Langleys, Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows and Richmond. Homelessness remains an issue that requires regionally based solutions.

4. The Count provides information that allows us to understand the needs of the street and sheltered homeless and move forward in addressing the issue of homelessness.

Updated information on changing demographic and geographic trends amongst the homeless population allows planners & policy makers working at all three levels of government along with service providers to work towards addressing the issue through advocacy, policy change, prevention programs and provision of adequate or increased

services as necessary. The philanthropic community also has a role to play and can be successful in advocating for change at the political level.

Q & A

1. Does the count include people who are homeless and not “on the street” – i.e. in emergency shelters?

Yes, the definition of a person who is homeless for the purposes of this count includes a person who lacks a fixed, regular and/or adequate night time residence. Persons who are in emergency shelters, safe houses and transition houses (including hotels used by the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance for emergency accommodation) are considered homeless.

2. How do we count people who are living rough?

We count people who are living rough by going to places where they may hang out, such as meal programs, bottle depots, drop-in centres, as well as parks, streets, ravines, and other locations where the homeless are known to gather. We conduct the count during the cold weather months when it is more likely that people who are homeless will be using emergency shelters or safe houses, as well as drop-in centres and meal programs.

3. How does the count capture sofa surfers?

As part of the daytime count, sofa surfers may be enumerated at bottle depots, drop-in centres, meal programs, panhandling, etc. In 2005, 24% of those enumerated as part of the daytime count reported that they were temporarily staying at someone else's place. However, if someone is not using a service or walking the street on the day of the count, then they will likely not be enumerated. We asked outreach workers to spread the word and urge individuals who were sofa surfing to report to designated locations to try to improve coverage among this group of homeless people.

4. How about homeless youth?

We have met with youth outreach workers working throughout Metro Vancouver in an attempt to involve them in the count, and help us to identify locations where homeless youth tend to gather or sleep. By-law officers, local RCMP, outreach workers and local homeless committees have assisted us to identify further locations.

5. How do you avoid double counting?

The count questionnaire used a series of screener questions to ensure that individuals being interviewed have not been counted previously, either in emergency shelter accommodation on the previous night or otherwise. Volunteers wear bright yellow badges with the Homeless

Count logo that is recognizable to the homeless. During analysis of count data, researchers will error on the side of caution when in doubt.

6. How many people are needed to help conduct the count?

We had close to 670 volunteers (335+ teams of two) to help with the daytime and night time count across Metro Vancouver. Across the region there was a significant increase in the level of public participation in the count. In addition, many service providers and agencies have participated. For example, emergency shelters, safe houses and transition houses in Metro Vancouver participated in the night time count.

7. Volunteer training

Volunteers were screened for the following abilities and skills:

- Accepting, compassionate and non-judgmental;
- Comfortable with conducting one-on-one interviews;
- Familiar dealing with people who are homeless or living in poverty;
- Have an awareness of mental illnesses, physical disabilities and substance misuse;
- Have an awareness of the systemic causes of homelessness and poverty.

Volunteers participated in a three hour training session that covered how to approach homeless people, methodology, screening, how to interview and how to interpret the responses, safety issues and logistical issues. The training also includes a demonstration of an interview, practice time and feedback. Methodological consistency was an important part of planning for this count,

8. Interviews

Interviewers worked in teams of two. Each team included a person knowledgeable about where people who are homeless may be found, and who is experienced in working with this population and sensitive to their needs.

9. How long did the daytime count take?

The daytime count began at 5:00 am and concluded at 10pm in the evening. There were some time variations between municipalities or sub-regions, depending on the services available in the evenings in the various municipalities.

10. Is the 2008 Count an ‘accurate’ count of people who are homeless in Metro Vancouver?

All counts of people who are homeless are by their nature conservative estimates of the true extent of the problem. Extensive planning and communication with service providers, outreach workers, local planning tables, RCMP and by-law officers and others before the

count has allowed us to develop an accurate up to date list of sites for volunteers. With the assistance of the largest group of volunteers to participate in a count in our region we have attempted to interview as many homeless persons during the count as possible. We have built on past experience with homeless counts, and the expertise of the local community to best reach the homeless population. The numbers are conservative and likely an undercount.

11. How do you know this may be an undercount?

On the day of the count, a total of 398 people were recorded as ‘perceived to be homeless’. These individuals were not interviewed, they may have refused to be interviewed, or were sleeping and did not respond to attempts to wake them. These people were not included as part of the total number of homeless counted in the preliminary release.

12. Homeless numbers have been reported by other sources recently, how is this count different?

This count provides a 24 hour snapshot of the street and sheltered homeless. Our number will tell us what is the minimum level of service that is needed as seen by a 24 hour snapshot. Only those individuals staying in emergency shelters or accessing services on the day of the count will be included in the ‘snapshot’.

13. How did we cover an area the size of Metro Vancouver? It would take countless volunteers to visit every possible site.

Yes that is true. And we have had the largest group of volunteers ever participating in the 2008 count. As well we consulted with local steering committees, outreach workers and service organizations across the region before the count to identify interview sites.

14. What has changed from the 2005 count methodology?

Many shelters are now operating 24 hours. We have spoken with all shelters in the region to develop a plan for the night time count which works within the operating hours of the shelter and prevents double counting of individuals

- In previous counts the night time shelter count was completed by shelter staff. For the 2008 count, volunteers have been assigned to assist with the count where needed.
- Local homelessness tables have played a greater role in count coordination, site identification and volunteer recruitment.
- With funding from a variety of sources, outreach workers are now found in greater numbers throughout the region. These outreach workers have played a large role in site identification.
- Attempts have been made to include additional areas not included or not well covered in the 2005 count such as SFU campus, Bowen Island, Delta (greater coverage), Anmore and Belcarra.
- Slight changes have been made to the questionnaire without jeopardizing the comparability to 2005.

- The number of volunteers participating in the count has virtually doubled since 2005 when a total of 300 volunteers participated.
- Additional information was gathered from Vancouver Coastal Health and Fraser Health Authorities to give us a picture of the number of individuals in hospitals and detox facilities on the night of the count with no fixed address. It is important to note that this information will be reported out separately from the homeless count number and is intended to provide context information for the count.
- Information was gathered from Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) social workers on the number of homeless youth known to them on the day of the count. Again this information will be reported out separately.

15. The total number of homeless only increased by 19% from 2005. This is considerably less than the increase from 2002-2005, why?

Over the last three years, the presence of outreach workers and additional services in many of these communities has been expanded allowing individuals to get the help and support they need. Although it may appear the growth has slowed, there are still 2592 individuals in our community who are homeless a minimum increase of 420 individuals.

16. Who is funding the count?

The count is funded by the Homelessness Partnership Initiative, United Way of the Lower Mainland and Vancouver Foundation.