

# On our streets and in our shelters...

## RESULTS OF THE 2005 GREATER VANCOUVER HOMELESS COUNT

### INTRODUCTION

This bulletin presents an overview of the findings of the 2005 Greater Vancouver Homeless Count. The Count provides an estimate of the region's homeless population, demographic information about the homeless population, and a comparison between the 2005 and 2002 counts. Homeless people were counted within the Greater Vancouver Regional district and its member municipalities where there were known populations of homeless people to count.

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

The count measured homelessness in the region at

a point-in-time – one 24-hour period (from 12:01 am to 11:59 pm) on March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2005. A point-in-time count tells us how many people were counted in one 24-hour period. This number would be smaller than the number of different people experiencing homeless over a longer period of time such as one year.

The 24-hour count of homeless individuals included two components:

- A. The enumeration of all shelters, safe houses and transition houses for the night of March 15 (12:01-5:30 am). This measured the size of the *sheltered homeless* population.
- B. The enumeration of 'locations' where homeless people might be found, such as congregating areas, meal programs and other services, during the hours of 5:30 am to midnight on March 15, 2005. This was designed to identify those homeless persons who had not spent the previous night in a shelter, safe house or transition house. This measured the size of the *street homeless* population.

# RESULTS OF THE COUNT

On March 15, 2005 there were 2,174 homeless people counted region-wide. Over half of the individuals were enumerated at day-time locations, meaning they slept rough or sofa surfed on the night of March 15<sup>th</sup>.

## Growth in number of homeless since 2002

Number homeless	2002	2005	Change	% Change
Sheltered homeless	788	1,047	259	33%
Street homeless	333	1,127	794	238%
Total homeless	1,121	2,174	1,053	94%

## Sheltered and Street Homeless in Greater Vancouver, March 15, 2005

Homeless category	Adults and unaccompanied youth		Accompanied children		Total homeless	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Sheltered homeless	995	47%	52	70%	1,047	48%
Shelters/safe houses	915	92%	24	46%	939	90%
Transition houses	80	8%	28	54%	108	10%
Street homeless	1,105	53%	22	30%	1,127	52%
Total homeless	2,100	100%	74	100%	2,174	100%

## HIGHLIGHTS

- There has been significant growth in the number of homeless counted region-wide, almost doubling from 1,121 persons in 2002 to 2,174 persons in 2005.
- More homeless people were found on the street on March 15 than in shelters and the number of street homeless has grown by 238% or almost 800 persons since the last count in 2002.
- People with Aboriginal identity were significantly over-represented among the region's homeless compared to their share of the total population (30% compared to 2%).
- There were proportionally more women among the Aboriginal homeless population (35%) than the non-Aboriginal homeless population (27%).
- The number and share of Aboriginal people was highest among the street homeless (357 people or 34% of the total street homeless) and smallest among the sheltered homeless (158 people or 23% of the total sheltered homeless).
- Forty families with children were enumerated on homeless count day. Most stayed in a shelter or transition house, although some families were among the street homeless.
- Over 600 people or one-third of the homeless population have been homeless for over one year, and are considered the long-term homeless. This characteristic was even more pronounced among the street homeless where 47% were homeless for one year or more.
- Shelters, safe houses and transition houses turned away 169 adults and 6 children on count night.

This was higher than the 111 turnaways reported in 2002.

- ⊙ Less than half of the homeless population (45%) had a steady income source such as income assistance, pension or disability benefits. The remainder survived with no income; income from binning or bottle collecting, panhandling, part-time and casual employment; or illegal activities. The sheltered homeless were more likely to receive income assistance than the street homeless.
- ⊙ Health conditions were very common among the homeless, with 74% of those counted having one or more health conditions (i.e., addiction, medical condition, mental illness, and/or physical disability). The street homeless were worse off in terms of health conditions than the sheltered homeless and the street homeless were more likely to report more than one health concern.
- ⊙ Addiction was the most common health condition. Almost half of the homeless who responded to this question reported problems with addiction. The share of street homeless reporting addiction (53%) was higher than the share of the sheltered homeless (43%).
- ⊙ There was a slight increase in the actual number of youth that were homeless from 272 in 2002 to 296 in 2005, although the youth share of the total homeless declined from 28% in 2002 to 15% in 2005. There was an actual decline in the number of homeless youth under 19 years old since the last count, from 124 in 2002 to 76 in 2005.
- ⊙ Homeless youth under 25 had the highest rate of addiction (56%) when compared to all homeless persons (49%) or any other sub-group.
- ⊙ The number of homeless seniors 55 and over enumerated on count day grew significantly from 51 persons in 2002 to 171 persons in 2005.
- ⊙ 84% of the homeless were found in the Vancouver and South of Fraser (primarily Surrey and the Langleys) sub-regions. The location of their last permanent home reported by the homeless was more evenly distributed around the region.

## IMPLICATIONS

In reflecting on the study, the team of consultants identified implications for possible next steps, including future research and issues to consider in planning for future services to address homelessness in the Greater Vancouver Region.

### Planning

- The results clearly show that alternative approaches need to be developed to address the issue of homelessness among people with addictions. Other research demonstrates a variety of approaches that could be considered (see Homelessness, Housing, and Harm Reduction: Stable Housing for Homeless People with Substance Use Issues - CMHC forthcoming).
- The results show that a significant number of homeless people did not access income assistance either because they are not eligible or perceive they are not eligible. Having access to income assistance may be a critical step in stemming the tide of an increasing number of homeless people in the Greater Vancouver region.
- Interviewees commented that the cost of housing contributed to their homelessness. In addition to eligibility for income assistance, additional options to consider include increasing the shelter component of income assistance so that the rates are more consistent with the actual cost of rents at the lower end of the available market, and increasing the supply of rent-geared-to-income housing.
- The over representation of Aboriginal people among the homeless is not reflected in the existing distribution of Aboriginal-run homeless services and emergency accommodations. Consideration should be given to increasing the capacity of Aboriginal organizations to address this issue. This could include increasing the amount of funding provided to Aboriginal organizations.
- While there has been an improvement in the number of services and facilities for homeless people that are available in most of the sub-regions and municipalities, there is still a preponderance of services in Vancouver. The findings show that the overwhelming majority of

homeless people had their last permanent home in the various municipalities throughout the Greater Vancouver region and services and facilities should be delivered in these areas.

- The apparent “aging” of the homeless population could have important implications for homeless service provision, including housing and shelters, and for costs to the health care system.

## Future Research

- ◎ The presence of families with children among the homeless, especially those on the street and in shelters (not transition houses), is especially alarming. While this is a relatively small group among the homeless, the consultants believe that this population warrants further study to ascertain the reasons why some families with children are homeless.

- ◎ A great deal of information was obtained from both this study and from the forthcoming study on the Hidden Homeless (see *Hidden Homelessness: Lessons from Experience*). The data from these studies provides ample material to better understand the incidence and causes of homelessness in the Greater Vancouver region.
- ◎ The Homeless Count should be repeated every 2-3 years to continue to track changes and trends.
- ◎ The count does not accurately reflect the number of homeless people who ‘sofa surf’. There is a need to find alternate approaches to counting sofa surfers, which do not put renters who reveal the presence of sofa surfers at risk of losing their tenancy.

The complete Report of the 2005 Homeless Count can be found at: <http://www.gvrd.bc.ca/homelessness/>

For additional information contact: Regional Homelessness Unit, GVRD (604) 451-6065.

REPORT PREPARED BY:



**Social Planning and Research Council of BC**

Vancouver, BC

[www.sparc.bc.ca](http://www.sparc.bc.ca)