



Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness

Still on our Streets — Final Report on the 2008 Homeless Count

FAQ

September 16, 2008

WHY COUNT?

Why did we need to count people who are homeless?

We needed to know the number and demographic profile of people who are homeless so that governments and service providers could plan and offer appropriate programs to address homelessness. By using a similar method as the 2002 and 2005 counts, we were able to identify trends – such as whether the situation improved, deteriorated, or stayed the same.

ABOUT THE COUNT

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

This count provided a 24-hour snapshot of the street and sheltered homeless. The final numbers will tell us the minimum level of service that is needed as seen by a 24-hour snapshot. Only those individuals staying in emergency shelters or accessing homeless programs and services on the day of the count are included in the ‘snapshot’.

Did 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) are considered homeless.

Did the count include people who are living rough and how did you count them?

Yes, we counted people who are living rough, and we did so by going to places where they sleep early in the morning, and by going to the places where they hang out during the day, such as bottle depots and free meal line ups.

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.

Is the 2008 Count an ‘accurate’ tally of the number 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 as well as others before the count allowed us to develop an accurate list of places for volunteers to canvass. With the assistance of the largest group of volunteers to participate in a count in our region, we attempted to interview as many homeless people during the count as possible. We 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.

Who sponsored the count?

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

THE RESULTS

Why are you releasing the final results of the count at this time, when the preliminary numbers were released in April? Why did it take so long to finalize the report?

The report has been going through its normal review and editing process with the count sponsor (HRSDC), the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, and the Aboriginal Homelessness Steering Committee.

What are the most significant findings in the report?

The final report discusses all the findings from the count. For this FAQ, a brief overview of some of the key findings is provided below. Readers who are interested in additional results should consult the full report which is available at www.metrovancouver.org/planning/homelessness/.

- ❖ ***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

Why is the number of homeless people continuing to increase if the federal government has been spending so much money on homelessness and if the RSCH & ASCH have been working on the issue?

The funding from the federal government through the Homelessness Partnering Strategy and the work of the RSCH and the ASCH have resulted in many new services and facilities for the homeless such as new shelters spaces and outreach workers.

Unfortunately, the number of homeless people continues to increase due to many different and often complex reasons. But it is fair to say that many of the causes of homelessness relate to decisions made by governments, businesses, the public and individuals. Often, these decisions were made without full recognition that they would lead to homelessness. The massive increases in housing costs in the region and lagging incomes in recent years have not helped the situation either.

The report shows a large share of homeless people have addiction problems. Isn't homelessness really about mental health and addiction issues?

There is no doubt that health conditions, including mental health and addictions, contribute to and are aggravated by not having a place to live. Living on the streets and in emergency shelters is not good for one's well-being. But homelessness isn't caused by addictions or mental illness. Homelessness is caused by a lack of affordable housing, and in some cases a lack of affordable housing with appropriate support services for people who have difficulty accessing and maintaining adequate housing.

The total number of homeless increased by 22% from 2005. This is considerably less than the increase from 2002-2005. Why?

Over the last three years, the presence of outreach teams in the region has increased services to the homeless, and in so doing allowed individuals to get the help and support that they need. Although it may appear the growth has slowed, there are still 2,660 individuals in our region who are homeless, a minimum increase of 486 individuals.

What are you going to do differently now?

We must continue the initiatives that have been taken in the last three years, such as outreach and support services, in order to move people off the street and help them to meet some fundamental needs. But beyond that, it is time to focus on longer term solutions. We know that building homeless shelters, while providing a needed emergency service will not solve homelessness. We need more affordable housing with support services so that homeless people can get off the streets into permanent housing. We also need more prevention strategies so that people are not forced onto the streets in the first place.

What is the one thing we can all do to solve the problem of homelessness?

Homelessness is a complex issue that cannot be boiled down to one simple solution. What is needed is for all of our partners to come to the table and work collaboratively to implement the Regional Homelessness Plan.

The Regional Homelessness Plan is titled *3 Ways to Home* to reflect the three components of the solution to homelessness: Affordable Housing, Support Services and Adequate Income. Action is needed on each of these components to address homelessness in the region.

Adequate housing, combined with supportive services, meaningful daily activity in the community (including work), and access to appropriate therapy, is the necessary framework to address mental health and addiction problems.

Are the recommendations in the report being made by SPARC BC, or are they from the RSCH and AHSC?

The recommendations in the report are those of the consultants, SPARC BC, and are based directly on the findings in the report. However, it is also important to note that the recommendations are consistent with the priorities of the Regional Homelessness Plan.