

Results of the 2014 Homeless Count in the Metro Vancouver Region: A Report of the Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness

Executive Summary

Background

The Homeless Count is an initiative of the Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness (RSCH). This year, at the request of the RSCH, the Homelessness Partnering Strategy Community Entity for the Metro Vancouver region, formerly known as the Metro Vancouver Homelessness Secretariat, provided overall project management to implement the count.

The RSCH has conducted a region-wide count of homeless individuals every three years since 2002. The 2014 Homeless Count in the Metro Vancouver region took place on the evening of March 11 and the day of March 12, 2014.

Purpose

The purpose of the Homeless Count is to estimate the number of people who are homeless in the Metro Vancouver region, obtain a demographic profile of this population, and identify trends compared to previous counts.

Definitions

A person was considered homeless for the purpose of this count 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 ‘outside’, in alleys, doorways, parkades, parks and vehicles;
- Were staying temporarily in emergency shelters for the homeless, transition houses for women and children fleeing violence, and safe houses for youth;
- Had no fixed address and were staying temporarily in a hospital, jail or detox facility; and
- Were staying temporarily at someone else’s place (couch surfing).

The **sheltered homeless** includes all homeless individuals in the count who were identified as homeless and who stayed overnight in an emergency shelter for the homeless, transition house for women and children fleeing violence, or safe house for youth during the count. It also includes individuals with no fixed address who were staying temporarily in a hospital, jail or detox facility during the count.

The **unsheltered homeless** includes all homeless individuals in the count who completed a street survey and who had no physical shelter (i.e. were staying ‘outside’, in alleys, doorways, parkades, parks and vehicles). It also includes people who were staying temporarily at someone else’s place (couch surfing) and who were found on the street or at a homeless service on the day of the count.¹

¹ Only a small percentage of the hidden homeless population is likely to be identified in a homeless count.

Methodology

The 2014 Homeless Count followed the same basic methodology and protocols used in previous counts and took place over a 24-hour period to provide a ‘snapshot’ of homelessness in the region during that time. As with previous Homeless Counts, it included both a shelter and street count.

Key Findings

- On the evening of March 11 and the day of March 12, 2014, a total of **2,777** homeless people were counted in the Metro Vancouver region. This included 2,689 adults and unaccompanied youth (under the age of 25) as well as 88 children (under the age of 19) who were accompanied by a parent during the count.²
- The number of homeless people identified in Homeless Counts in the region has remained fairly stable since 2008 – increasing by 4% between 2008 and 2014. This is less than the rate of increase for the population of the Metro Vancouver region as a whole, which increased by 9% in the same period.
- A higher proportion of the homeless population was sheltered in 2014 and 2011 compared to 2005 and 2008.
- Men represented about three quarters of the homeless population in 2014 (73%) and women represented about one quarter (27%). However, women tend to be more represented in the hidden homeless population, often doubling up with families and friends or staying in unsafe situations rather than staying on the street or accessing services for the homeless, and are likely undercounted. Nine people identified as transgendered in 2014 and it has been suggested that this is also likely an undercount.
- Adults aged 45 to 54 comprised the largest group among the homeless (25%), followed by adults aged 35 to 44 (20%), and children and youth under the age of 25 (20%). 410 homeless children and youth were counted in the Metro Vancouver region. This included 88 children who were accompanied by a parent.
- 582 homeless people identified as an Aboriginal person during the count, representing about one third of the total homeless population in the Metro Vancouver region. Aboriginal Peoples are over-represented in the region’s homeless population given they represent 2% of Metro Vancouver’s population. The proportion of the homeless population that identifies as an Aboriginal person has remained virtually unchanged at about one third since 2005. The proportion decreased to 27% in 2011 but increased again to 31% in 2014.
- Survey participants were asked, “What do you think is keeping you from finding a place of your own”. Low income (47%) and high rents (42%) were reported as the main barriers.

²Youth is anyone under the age of 25 who was not accompanied by a parent during the count. Some youth were under the age of 16. ‘Children’ includes anyone under the age of 19 who was accompanied by a parent.

Respondents also identified having no income (21%) as one of the barriers to finding a place.³ Addiction (27%) was reported as the third main barrier to finding a place, for both the sheltered and unsheltered homeless.

- Respondents were asked to identify their sources of income. The sources of income respondents identified most were income assistance (43%), disability benefit (21%), part-time employment (16%), and binning/bottle collecting (14%). About one in ten homeless individuals reported receiving no income.
- 35% of respondents reported having one health condition, 45% reported two or more health conditions, and 20% reported no health conditions. Nearly half the respondents reported having an addiction (49%). The next most common health issue was a medical condition (41%), while about one third (34%) of respondents reported a mental illness. A total of 21% of respondents reported a concurrent disorder (i.e. both mental illness and addiction).
- About one fifth of respondents (19%) had been homeless for less than one month and are considered 'newly homeless'. A higher proportion of the sheltered homeless had been homeless for less than a month (23%) compared to the unsheltered homeless (14%).
- 41% of respondents reported being homeless for one year or more and are considered 'long-term homeless'. The unsheltered homeless were more likely to have been homeless for one year or more (45%) compared to the sheltered homeless (37%).
- The homeless population may not be as transient as is commonly believed. Among respondents, 79% reported living in the city where they were interviewed for at least one year, including half of respondents (51%) who reported living there 10 years or more. More than 200 individuals reported that they had lived in the city where they were interviewed their whole lives and many others had moved to the community at a young age. Very few individuals (2%) reported having just moved to the municipality where they were interviewed within a week before the homeless count.
- Homeless Count participants were asked what services they had used in the past 12 months. The top three services used by homeless individuals were meal programs (46%), hospital emergency rooms (42%), and drop-in centres (40%).
- The sheltered homeless were asked how many nights in a row they had stayed at the shelter where they were being surveyed. The majority of respondents had spent less than one month at the shelter. A higher proportion of respondents reported staying in a shelter for up to one month in 2014 (68%) compared to 2011 (55%).
- As part of the unsheltered survey, respondents were asked where they had stayed the previous night. More than half of respondents (56%) had spent the previous night outside or in a vehicle,

³ Respondents could select more than one response, so numbers for one response cannot be added to another.

while 40% stayed at someone else's place.⁴ Other locations included 24-hour restaurants, abandoned buildings, or at a location in an exploitive situation (i.e. with a pimp or client).

- Just over half the unsheltered homeless (54%) reported having stayed in a shelter at some point in the last 12 months. This indicates that gathering information on the homeless population using only shelter data would miss a significant proportion of the homeless population who do not use shelters.
- 80% of the homeless population was found in Vancouver and Surrey, with Vancouver having the largest concentration (65%), followed by Surrey (15%). The rest of the homeless people were found across the other municipal sub-regions.
- In most municipal sub-regions: Burnaby, Delta/White Rock, Langley, Ridge Meadows, Richmond and Surrey, at least 50% of the homeless people who moved there within the year were from another community within the Metro Vancouver region. Most of the homeless people who moved to the Tri-Cities within the year were from a part of BC outside the Metro Vancouver region. In Vancouver and the North Shore, most of the homeless people who moved there were from another part of Canada. In Vancouver, 117 out of 208 respondents (56%) who had lived in the City for less than one year were from another part of Canada.

It is understood that homeless counts underestimate the number of people who are homeless on a given day and the 2014 Homeless Count was no exception. Despite best efforts to include everyone who was homeless during the count, service providers reported that the numbers underestimate the true extent of homelessness in the Metro Vancouver region.

⁴ This includes data on nine children who were accompanied by a parent.