Full report on the 2020 Homeless Count in Metro Vancouver provides new details on homelessness prior to the pandemic

Data shows number of people experiencing homelessness changed little from 2017; however, the changes brought on by COVID-19 mean the final report may not adequately reflect regional homelessness. Indigenous people and racialized groups continue to be over-represented among those experiencing homelessness.

The 2020 Homeless Count in Metro Vancouver was conducted on the traditional and ancestral unceded territory of the: Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil- Waututh, Kwikwetlem, Tsawwassen, Katzie, Kwantlen, Qayqayt, and Semiahmoo Nations. They have been custodians of this land for thousands of years and we would like to pay our respect to the elders and knowledge keepers both past and present.

Please note: photos and video clips from the Homeless Count (March 4, 2020) are available here.

VANCOUVER, BC (NOV. 26, 2020) – New data contained in the final report on the 2020 Homeless Count in Metro Vancouver is painting a more detailed picture of pre-pandemic homelessness throughout the region.

The report includes additional data on a number of demographic and other factors from the count, which took place on the evening of March 3 and throughout the day on March 4 – approximately two weeks before the provincial government declared a state of emergency due to COVID-19. While the implementation of the count was not significantly affected, it is important to note that the final report offers a baseline understanding of homelessness prior to the pandemic, and contains information that may no longer adequately reflect the state of homelessness in the region.

A total of 3,634 people were identified as experiencing homelessness in the Metro Vancouver region during the 2020 count. The largest numbers of people experiencing homelessness were found in Vancouver (2,095), Surrey (644) and Langley (209). Across the region, there were 29 more people counted this year compared to the 2017 homeless count, representing a change of less than 1%. This suggests regional homelessness remained somewhat consistent prior to the pandemic. For more information on how COVID-19 has impacted homelessness across the country, please see updated data from the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness.

In a continuing trend, Indigenous people are overrepresented in those experiencing homelessness, with 711 individuals identified in the count or 33% of survey respondents overall. When compared to what their presence in the general population would predict, Indigenous people are 13.2 times more likely to experience homelessness. For full details from the 2020 Indigenous Homeless Count in Metro Vancouver, click here.



“The Indigenous community continues to be disproportionately impacted by homelessness, accounting for more than one third of all homeless peoples in Metro Vancouver,” said David Wells, Chair of the Indigenous Homelessness Steering Committee (IHSC). “The situation is not improving with more than half of homeless Indigenous Peoples living in an unsheltered situation, which is twice that of non-Indigenous people. The situation is even more dire as we all look to take shelter from COVID.”

The 2020 homeless count marks the first time the count survey asked individuals specifically whether they identified with any racial group(s). The results show that Black people were particularly overrepresented among identified racialized groups experiencing homelessness, as they were 3.7 times more likely to experience homelessness compared to what their presence in the general population would predict. Latin American and Arab respondents were also found to be overrepresented amongst those experiencing homelessness, with Latin Americans being 1.7 times and Arabs 1.3 times more likely to experience homelessness.

“When there is blindness, and no racialized attention to the collection of data, what you’re doing is serving the needs of the majority – and you’re going to develop programs for homelessness that assume a white normative, because that’s a majority story you’re telling yourself,” said Dr. June Francis, Director of the Institute for Diaspora Research and Engagement at Simon Fraser University. “There is enormous discrimination against people of colour with respect to housing, employment, health and over-policing. My hope is that now that we have this data…that we can start to put resources around making sure our programs support those community organizations and the people who can actually provide the services that are appropriate to these target groups.”

Health concerns were again found to be a significant factor in relation to homelessness, with 87% of respondents citing at least one health condition including a physical disability, illness, addiction, mental health issue or cognitive impairment. Among those reporting a health condition, 60% reported an addiction (including substances, alcohol, cigarettes, gambling, etc.). This figure is particularly concerning given the ongoing dual public health emergencies in B.C., and speaks to the deep connection between severe trauma, substance use, and homelessness.

The findings also show that the general social, demographic profile of those experiencing homelessness may be shifting with more seniors (55 and over) and fewer youth (24 and under) found to be experiencing homelessness when compared to the count in 2017. Seniors represented 24% of the homeless population overall, up from 22% three years ago, while there were 193 youth identified in 2020 down from 386 in 2017. However, it is also possible that youth homelessness can be more hidden, with more youth “couch-surfing” or relying on friends. This represents a change from approximately 16% of those counted in 2017 to approximately 11% of those counted in 2020. It is also worth noting that youth represent an important sub-group within the homeless population who have been most impacted by the pandemic, and that the information collected at the time of the count does not accurately reflect their current situation.

Detailed data regarding community of residence indicate that most people experiencing homelessness have lived in the region for many years. Of the survey respondents, 60% have lived in the community where they were interviewed for five years or more. Among those 1,244 respondents, 30% had been in the community for 10 years or more while 18% said they had always lived there. For those who indicated they had not always lived in their current community, 58% (1,003 individuals) had come from elsewhere in B.C.

The final report on the 2020 homeless count also includes data on individuals' first experiences of homelessness, sources of income, numbers of youth and seniors experiencing homelessness, gender, sexual orientation and more. Data is also broken down into sheltered and unsheltered categories.

"This information helps to play a role in shaping local funding decisions and priorities related to the funding available through the Federal Reaching Home program and speaks to the importance of the federal government's goal of working to reduce chronic homelessness by 50% by 2028," said Lorraine Copas, Chair of the Greater Vancouver Reaching Home Community Advisory Board. "We know that it will take each of us working together in our communities to help to make this happen."

To view the full report, please visit: https://www.vancitycommunityfoundation.ca/initiatives/2020-homeless-count

ABOUT THE COUNT

Point-in-time counts have been conducted in Metro Vancouver every three years since 2002 and annually in the City of Vancouver since 2010. The purpose of the count is to estimate the number of people experiencing homelessness, obtain a demographic profile of those individuals, and identify trends compared to previous counts. Governments, funders and community agencies rely on data from homeless counts to help make informed policy and program decisions.

The count takes place over a 24-hour period to provide a snapshot of individuals experiencing homelessness in 18 communities across the region, including an extended count pilot project on the North Shore. The 2020 Homeless Count in Metro Vancouver is a community-driven initiative of the Reaching Home Designated and Indigenous Community Entity, Lu'ma Native Housing Society, in partnership with Vancity Community Foundation together with the Greater Vancouver Community Advisory Board, the Indigenous Homelessness Steering Committee and the Council of Community Homelessness Tables. The count was conducted by BC Non-Profit Housing Association (BCNPHA).

The 2020 Homeless Count was made possible due to the ongoing and dedicated work of local Community Homelessness Tables and hundreds of volunteers across the region. Thank you!



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