

REPORT

Climate Action, Planning and Development

To: Mayor Johnstone and Members of Council
Date: October 30, 2023

From: Jackie Teed, Acting Director,
Climate Action, Planning and
Development
File: 13.2630.09

Item #: 2023-665

Subject: 2023 Point-in-Time Homeless Count: Key Findings and Messages

RECOMMENDATION

THAT Council receive this report for information.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to share key findings from the document entitled “2023 Homeless Count in Greater Vancouver” and a separate dataset which provided more specific information on those enumerated as part of the count in New Westminister.

BACKGROUND

The 2023 Point-in-Time Homeless Count in Greater Vancouver was conducted on the evening of March 7, 2023 in safe houses, shelters, transition houses, hospitals and police holding cells, and from 6:00 a.m. to midnight on March 8, 2023. The count has taken place every three years since 2005. The previous count in 2020 was held approximately a week before the COVID-19 pandemic was declared a public health emergency in British Columbia, so the report represents a timely update on the homelessness situation through the pandemic period.

Using a point-in-time homeless count method, the 2023 count provides a 24-hour snapshot of the minimum number of people experiencing homelessness in Metro Vancouver.

DISCUSSION

The following information is specific to New Westminster and is based on survey responses to questions of both enumerated unsheltered and sheltered homeless persons. Some questions received higher response rates than others, and the information provided is self-reported.

Numbers

There were 57 unsheltered homeless persons enumerated as part of the 2023 point-in-time homeless count. This represented an increase of 16 persons or 39% from the 2020 point-in-time homeless count.

There were 146 sheltered homeless persons enumerated as part of the 2023 point-in-time homeless count. This represented an increase of 64 persons or 78% from the 2020 point-in-time homeless count. Of note, of the 146 sheltered homeless persons enumerated, 63 or 43% were staying in the nightly shelter which is operated by Purpose Society and is accessed off of Front Street.

There were 203 unsheltered and sheltered homeless persons enumerated as part of the 2023 point-in-time homeless count. This represented an increase of 80 persons or 65% from the 2020 point-in-time homeless count.

Age

Of those enumerated who responded to the question on age, 76% self-identified as an adult (25-54), 22% self-identified as a senior (55+) and 2% self-identified as a youth (under 25). Of note, youth tend to be significantly under-reported in counts as they are more likely to couch surf and less likely to utilize services and supports that address the needs of the unsheltered.

Gender Identity

Of those enumerated who responded to the question on gender identity, 74% self-identified as male, 25% self-identified as female and 1% self-identified as another gender identity. Of note, females tend to be under-reported in counts as they are more likely to couch surf or stay temporarily with family members or friends.

Indigenous Identity

Of those enumerated who responded to the question on Indigenous identity, 27% self-identified as Indigenous. Of note, 43% of those who self-identified as Indigenous were unsheltered homeless persons and 12% of those who self-identified as Indigenous were sheltered homeless persons.

Sexual Orientation

Of those enumerated who responded to the question on sexual orientation, 4% self-identified as LGBTQ2S+ in New Westminster.

Health Conditions

Of those enumerated who responded to the question on health conditions, 47% self-reported a mental health issue. Of note, 61% of those who self-reported a mental health issue were unsheltered homeless persons and 33% of those who self-reported a mental health issue were sheltered homeless persons.

Of those enumerated who responded to the question on health conditions in New Westminster, 52% self-reported an addiction. Of note, 78% of those who self-reported an addiction were unsheltered homeless persons and 25% of those who self-reported an addiction were sheltered homeless persons. Addiction, as referred to in the count survey, includes both behavioural and substance issues, and encompasses alcohol, cannabis, gambling, opioids and stimulants.

Length of Time in Community

Of those enumerated who responded to the question on length of time in community, 19% self-reported 1 to 5 years; 11% self-reported 5 to 10 years; 26% self-reported 10+ years; and 7% reported having always lived in the community.

Reasons for Loss of Housing

Of those enumerated who responded to the question on reason(s) for loss of housing, a wide variety of reasons were cited with those enumerated often citing more than one reason thus the percentages do not add up to 100%. The five main cited reasons were: not enough income (29%), addiction/substance use (23%), landlord/tenant conflict (22%), spouse/parent conflict (20%) and mental health issue (20%).

Length of Time Homeless

Of those enumerated who responded to the question on length of time homeless, 27% self-reported being homeless for under six months; 10% self-reported being homeless for six months to under one year; and 63% self-reported being homeless for one year or longer.

ANALYSIS

The following are some of the key findings and messages based on a review of the count surveys responses with specific reference to New Westminster.

- All point-in-time homeless counts should be considered as undercounts; however, the number for New Westminster is likely less of an undercount than for other

municipalities. This is a result of the city's small geographic size (15.6 sq. km) and the large number of volunteer enumerators (40, including a team from the Spirit of the Children Society) who participated in the count for New Westminster. As the count report notes: "Low-density neighbourhoods, forests, shorelines and parklands are especially difficult for volunteer enumerators to cover even with teams being deployed in cars or on bicycles."

- Most municipalities experienced significant increases in homelessness between the point-in-time homeless counts conducted in 2020 and 2023. New Westminster experienced a 65% increase. As for neighbouring municipalities, they experienced the following increases: Surrey (65%), Burnaby (69%), Tri-Cities (86%), and Richmond (91%)
- As cited, New Westminster experienced a 65% increase in homelessness between the point-in-time homeless counts conducted in 2020 and 2023; however, most of this increase was among those who are sheltered (64 persons or 80%) as opposed to those who are unsheltered (16 persons or 20%). As such, the increase in unsheltered homelessness was 39%.
- New Westminster has not experienced large homeless encampments which have become commonplace in other municipalities in Metro Vancouver.
- There is a significant over-representation of enumerated self-identified Indigenous persons among the homeless in New Westminster. While Indigenous people represent 3.1% of the population in New Westminster, they represent 43% of the enumerated unsheltered homeless persons and 12% of the enumerated sheltered homeless persons. This discrepancy may indicate that shelter services are not culturally sensitive or responsive to the needs of those who self-identify as Indigenous. Of note, of the enumerated self-identified Indigenous persons, 58% self-reported that they or a family member had experienced residential schools. This may indicate a mistrust of government funded services and institutional like settings.
- The majority of enumerated unsheltered and sheltered homeless persons have longer-term ties to New Westminster. Of note, 19% had lived in the community for 1 to 5 years and 44% had lived in the community for 6+ years. Combined, this accounts for 63% of enumerated homeless persons. This indicates that the homeless population is not as transient as some believe, and that connections to informal and formal support networks are important.
- There are significant discrepancies in self-reported health conditions between those who are unsheltered homeless persons and those who are sheltered homeless persons in New Westminster. In fact, the enumerated unsheltered homeless persons self-report 28% more mental health issues and 53% more addiction issues. This speaks to the importance of enhanced access to shelters and supportive housing, as well as health and support services for the unsheltered.

- The City is working with the Province to address homelessness, and the related issues of mental health and substance use. The current housing affordability crisis is also a contributing factor to increasing homelessness. These issues are complex and fall under the jurisdiction of the senior levels of government.
- Recent initiatives to address homelessness in New Westminster include the preparation of a *Homelessness Action Strategy* (July 2022); the development of 52 units of supportive housing at 68 Sixth Street; enhanced homeless outreach support; improved hygiene and sanitation services for the unsheltered; expanded monitoring and response efforts, including with Provincial mental health and substance use teams; and work towards a purpose-built 24/7 shelter with support services.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are significant financial implications associated with addressing homelessness and its externalities as it relates to City resources and services. There are also significant financial implications to the senior levels of government, who have jurisdiction for addressing homelessness. With respect to this information report, there are no financial implications.

INTERDEPARTMENTAL LIAISON

The Downtown Livability Staff Working Group includes representation from all City Departments which have a role in addressing or responding to homelessness, mental health and substance use issues. This report, and the documentation in which it is based, will be instrumental with regard to better targeting interventions to address these issues and advocating to the senior levels of government for additional assistance, funding and support.

OPTIONS

The following options are presented for Council's consideration:

1. That Council receive this report for information.
2. That Council provide other direction.

Staff recommends Option 1.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1 – 2023 Homeless Count in Greater Vancouver

APPROVALS

This report was prepared by:
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This report was reviewed by:
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This report was approved by:
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