

METRO VANCOUVER

Homeless numbers on the rise, despite efforts

'Unacceptable' situation a political blow to Mayor Gregor Robertson

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The number of people sleeping on the streets or couch-surfing across Vancouver has more than tripled since 2011, despite ambitious plans by Mayor Gregor Robertson and his Vision Vancouver-dominated council to end homelessness by 2015.

Some 538 people in Vancouver — up from 154 in 2011 — were identified as being homeless and having no shelter during the region's 24-hour homeless count on March 12.

Another 1,260 people in Vancouver were identified as being "sheltered" homeless, which means they were found in shelters, safe houses for youth or transition houses for women when the snapshot was taken.

The numbers, although preliminary, show Vancouver continues to swell the bulk of the region's 2,770 homeless population, which was up five per cent over 2011. Most of the 957 street homeless in Metro Vancouver were in Vancouver, Surrey, Burnaby and 11 other cities in the region recorded drops in street homelessness.

The increased numbers are a political blow for Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson. Days before the count was released, Robertson released his own report, blaming the provincial government for delays in completing supportive housing projects and closing temporary shelter housing. He also said people were being pushed on to the street due to a high number of renovations in privately owned, single-room occupancy units as owners raise rents above provincial shelter rates.

Robertson acknowledged the situation is a setback.

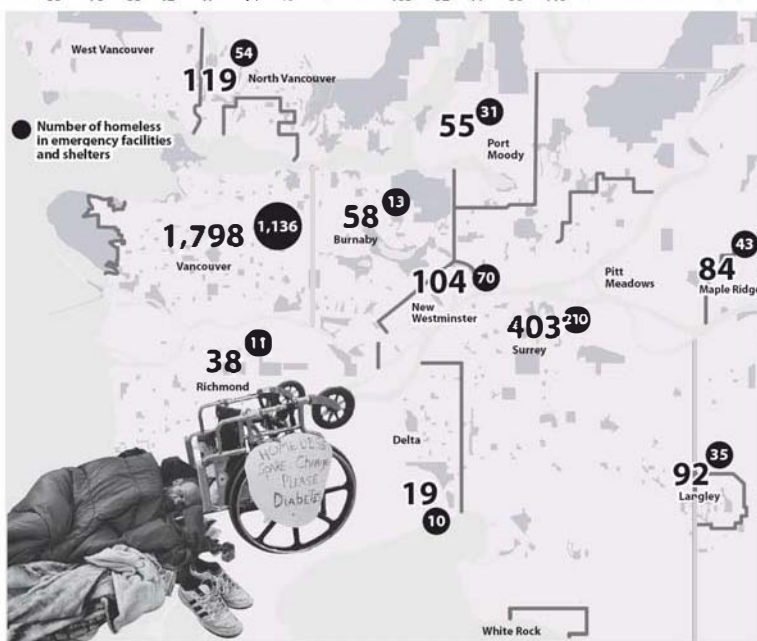
"This is really frustrating news to see the street count that high," Robertson said. "We have to redouble our efforts to solve homelessness. Thousands of people are sleeping outside and that's unacceptable."

An analysis of the numbers is expected to provide a fuller picture of each city across Metro Vancouver when the final report is issued in July. Deb Bryant, chairwoman of the Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, said she's concerned that there are so many aboriginals, youth and seniors on the

Homeless in Metro in 2014

There are 2,700 homeless people in Metro Vancouver, a five-per-cent increase from 2011. Here's how the numbers break down.

Burnaby					Delta/White Rock					Langley					Ridge Meadows					New Westminster				
Year/homeless numbers					Year/homeless numbers					Year/homeless numbers					Year/homeless numbers					Year/homeless numbers				
'05	'08	'11	'14		'05	'08	'11	'14		'05	'08	'11	'14		'05	'08	'11	'14		'05	'08	'11	'14	
42	86	78	58		12	17	14	19		57	86	103	92		44	90	110	84		95	124	132	104	



North Shore					Richmond					Surrey					Tri-Cities					Vancouver				
Year/homeless numbers					Year/homeless numbers					Year/homeless numbers					Year/homeless numbers					Year/homeless numbers				
'05	'08	'11	'14		'05	'08	'11	'14		'05	'08	'11	'14		'05	'08	'11	'14		'05	'08	'11	'14	
90	127	122	119		35	56	49	38		392	402	400	403		40	94	48	55		1,364	1,576	1,364	1,798	

The preliminary homeless numbers for Metro Vancouver in 2014 are based on a 24-hour period on March 12. Final numbers and analysis are expected in July.

streets or in shelters.

Aboriginal people continue to make up nearly one-third, or 31 per cent, of the total homeless population in Metro Vancouver, with the latest count identifying 582 aboriginals compared with 397 in 2011. Of those, 72 per cent were in Vancouver and 12 per cent in Surrey. At the same time, a "troubling number" of

410 homeless youth under the age of 25 were counted in the snapshot, Bryant said, along with 371 seniors over the age of 55 and 88 children under the age of 16.

The regional numbers appear to be stabilized, she said, but are nonetheless troubling.

"We have stemmed the tide of the rapid homelessness we

saw in the mid-2000s but this shows we still have more work to do," Bryant said. "The picture isn't fabulous but at least we're holding."

The Metro Vancouver homeless count, which occurs every three years, is conducted by volunteers who attempt to calculate the minimum number of the region's homeless over a

24-hour period. These include people living in shelters, on the streets or couch-surfing, women fleeing violence and those with no fixed address, who may be staying temporarily in jails, hospitals or detox centres.

Robertson said there are opportunities to turn the problem around by next winter,

Robertson said, with more beds and housing already in the works. But both he and New Westminster Mayor Wayne Wright admit they will need the help of the provincial and federal governments if they are to fully address the problem.

Wright, chairman of Metro's housing committee, noted most cities in Metro Vancouver have done all they can to reduce homelessness and senior levels of government have to step up. He added while he rarely hears complaints from people about homelessness in his city anymore, Vancouver is likely seen as a "magnet" for homeless people who like the lifestyle and find it an easier place to hide.

However, Wright said his city will take a hard look at the numbers and how they were counted to determine what more can be done locally.

He noted mental illness is a huge problem across the region, and perhaps it's time to revisit the idea of reopening facilities like Riverview to provide certain types of housing to help deal with the homeless problem.

"We're going to take a good look at this," Wright said. "The problem of mental illness is going to be a big issue for all of us. The province is tackling the issue of keeping people in their homes with rent subsidies, but we have new people coming in. How do you put enough facilities in if they keep coming?"

The B.C. Non-Profit Housing Association and Curragie Community Action Project agree more investment is needed to provide cheaper homes for those who need it. The CCAP quantifies the housing crisis in the Downtown Eastside is a reason behind the escalating homelessness in Vancouver because nobody can afford to live there anymore — the properties are instead being marketed to students and artists. Vancouver would help resolve the issue, the CCAP's Tamara Herman said, if it was willing to put rent controls in place.

"Our 2013 study showed that DTES residents have to pay more of their limited income for an SR0 room in despicable condition if they want to remain housed in their neighbourhood."

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