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The Politics of Homelessness

As The GVRD's Underclass Grows, So Does The Need For A Unified Force To Address It

Whiz, as he calls himself, drags a Home Depot shopping cart out of the bushes near the Gateway SkyTrain station. It's dusk, and we leave his makeshift campsite, a torn pup tent amid scattered clothing and garbage, and set out across an abandoned lot, passing a small wooden cross that remembers a murdered prostitute named Dottie. We are looking for food.

Whiz has been on and off the streets for the past decade. What strikes him now is the growing number of people in the playgrounds and parks of Surrey, sleeping rough. "It's busier, for sure," he says. "You look in the trees and bush, you'll find them. Out here, you got to be careful not to trip on someone."

We roll past the pawnshops and convenience stores, toward the Front Room, one of the few 24-hour drop-in centres that serve the 2.1 million people of the Greater Vancouver Regional District. As we approach the building, others with backpacks and shopping carts emerge from the darkness for the evening meal, prepared and served this night by a local church. This and another shelter, a total of 55 beds, some of them only open during the cold season, service a sprawling municipality with a population larger than Vancouver.

Here, on a nondescript street in Whalley, on the edge of suburbia, is the new epicentre for homelessness in Canada. To the amazement of many, the annual count of people living outdoors or in shelters around Surrey increased more than 50 percent in 2003, from 160 in 2002 to about 250. It's everywhere else, too: Port Coquitlam, Coquitlam, and Port Moody are now bussing homeless people to New Westminster for shelter and services. And a Salvation Army shelter in Maple Ridge, open since April 2003, can barely keep up with demand. The GVRD recorded a total of 5,000 turnaways last winter, people looking for shelter or services at maxed-out agencies, with even more expected this year.

Many of the people eating dinner at the Front Room--unemployed workers, addicts, abused women--will stay the night. People sleep sitting at tables, heads down, and others will squeeze into whatever available floor space remains; the lucky ones will get one of 36 spaces in bunk rooms on the second floor. Sixty slept here last night. But the week before, during a cold snap, saw almost 100, most crammed into a room not larger than the size of a modest downtown condo.

Linda Syssoloff, director of programs at the Front Room, admits that although they won't turn away anyone, even addicts and drunks, they can't help everyone either. "We try as best we can, but the numbers are growing higher," she says. On some days, their needle exchange, health clinic, and drop-in, all run under the auspices of the nonprofit South Fraser Community Services, are pushed to the limit. For the terminally sick, it is virtually an AIDS hospice; for the mentally ill, it is a psych ward; for the unemployed, it is a job-search and computer station. And sometimes it is an emergency ward, with staff forced to perform triage and minor procedures before the ambulance

arrives.

Food and the comforts of home--laundry, TV, showers--are popular attractions, because most people here can't afford both. With the basic provincial shelter allowance pegged at \$325 per month, even those who qualify for welfare are forced to make tough choices. "If you spend your money on housing, well, you don't eat," Syssoloff says. With most local basement suites starting at \$500, "there is really no affordable housing."

The full picture has now just become clearer. About three weeks ago, the GVRD doubled its estimate of the homeless population across Greater Vancouver. From a 1,200-person count in 2002, the current estimate has now doubled to 2,400, GVRD planner Verna Semotuk reports. "Service providers and shelters are all saying that their numbers have spiked," Semotuk says in a phone interview, explaining the dramatic increase in the homeless count. "We're now seeing some of the results of [social-assistance] cuts made two years ago."

Such widespread and rapid growth is almost unprecedented in post--Second World War Canadian history. Other centres like Toronto and Calgary have, to some degree, anticipated the boom in homelessness, although both have had mixed success. And with a B.C. provincial government that spends most of its housing dollars on "supportive" housing that offers little relief to the destitute, and a federal government that has yet to champion a national plan on homelessness, Greater Vancouver is proving itself surprisingly vulnerable.

What really scares everyone, homeless and outreach workers alike, is the new eligibility rules for provincial income assistance that are expected to take effect as early as the end of March. Based on limits that restrict recipients to only two years of benefits in a five-year period, the new rules are expected to cull tens of thousands of people from B.C.'s welfare rolls. (Leaked government documents from last October estimated 29,000 people might be cut off across B.C., and 6,300 in Vancouver alone.) Municipal politicians estimate that the welfare cuts could deliver anywhere from 600 to 2,000 new homeless to the streets of the GVRD. If that maximum figure happens, it would represent an enormous increase in homelessness within two years.

So what does this mean for Vancouver?

"Absolute disaster," says Mayor Larry Campbell, noting that 2004 began with a cold snap that filled shelters to capacity. "I mean, 200 I might be able to handle, but 2,000, I mean, it just can't happen."

The plain fact is this: with human overflow from outer municipalities, and with some of those districts clearly ill-equipped to manage existing social problems, downtown Vancouver could see an influx of the destitute from across the region and the province, and possibly end up rivalling Toronto as the homeless capital of Canada. "I would like to not believe that the [Liberal] government would put that much stress, any more stress on the system," Campbell says, struggling to comprehend the possibilities. "It simply can't handle it; it just cannot handle it."

VANCOUVER'S TRANSFORMATION into a magnet for homelessness didn't happen overnight. The suburbanization of homelessness on display in Surrey is part of a broader trend: incomes have been declining in Vancouver, relative to the rest of Canada, while rents and real-estate prices have kept pace with Toronto and other expensive cities. A troubled natural-resources-and-manufacturing sector offers fewer good jobs. Moreover, the provincial Liberals' introduction of a "training wage"

in 2001, which allows employers to undercut existing minimum-wage rates by \$2 per hour for new workers, placed additional pressures on B.C.'s working poor.

Behind this is the dawning realization that Vancouver is harbouring a new kind of underclass, an expanded poverty zone, one that's just as connected to the declining fortunes of suburbanites as to the hard-living addicts on the Downtown Eastside. And, as seen in places like Calgary and Toronto, this pool of the destitute and people on the edge of homelessness persists, largely unaffected by positive economic trends.

Peter Fedof, program manager at Hyland House, Surrey's only other--and only full-time--homeless shelter, says that he noticed something change in 1999. It was like hitting a wall. "Somewhere around that time, we were full, chronically full," he recalls. "I'm now over 100 percent [capacity] on a monthly basis." Surrey only has one-10th of the shelter beds available in downtown Vancouver and just a small fraction of its frontline services.

"I've been trying to understand what's been going on," Fedof says, looking out at the fir trees and steel gates that surround his shelter. "I think it's the economy, the jobless recovery. But quite a few of our people here are already working, consistently working." Indeed, 70 percent of those who seek shelter at Hyland do so due to economic circumstances or family trouble; only 20 to 25 percent of all beds are filled because of addictions or mental-health reasons.

The emergence of the working homeless is one piece of the puzzle. (Calgary has seen studies that show as many as half its shelter population already have jobs.) The other piece of the puzzle, one that has received scant media attention, is the surprising growth in households considered to be at risk for homelessness over the past decade. The number of Vancouverites who spend 50 percent or more of their income on shelter has grown substantially since 1991, based on federal census data. The most recent available census data reveals an increase of 65 percent between 1991 and 1996 for at-risk individuals across Greater Vancouver, and almost 50 percent growth for households. Incredibly, one-third of these 58,000 at-risk households are homeowners, not renters.

It's something that's happening all across Canada, where an estimated 1.8 million people are at risk of homelessness. And local spikes throughout Greater Vancouver are worrisome: an 82-percent increase in households at risk in the northeast, from Coquitlam to Belcarra; and a 62-percent increase south of the Fraser River, from Surrey to Langley. (Early analysis from the 2001 census, whose housing results are not yet fully available, indicates that this increase has slowed for most of Canada and improved slightly in Ontario and Quebec.)

Some municipalities have only recently begun to address troubles within their own communities. And some, like Surrey, saw resistance against the issue. "A few years ago, we weren't discussing this issue publicly," says Annie McKittrick, executive director of the nonprofit Surrey Social Futures society. "Traditionally, municipalities said, 'We don't deal with this issue.' But they came around."

The learning curve on the new face of homelessness is steep, even for leaders. Liberal Premier Gordon Campbell weighed in last October, blaming Vancouver for its own homelessness and, in particular, the tent-city protest at False Creek and other locations. "This is a Vancouver problem," the premier said. "There's not a problem in Surrey, there's not a problem in West Vancouver, there's not a problem in Port Moody, because they enforce their bylaws."

As governments scramble to make sense of homelessness--or avoid it altogether--frontline workers like Fedof are losing patience. "I would advocate that the three levels of government need to communicate," Fedof says. "And the community needs to realize that the issue is poverty. We need to own that issue."

All around us are the green streets of Surrey and gleaming strip malls, gateways to the middle class. But few people, it seems, are completely immune. "It doesn't take much to get there," Fedof says, noting how many homeowners are struggling to stay solvent. "What happens when the mortgage rate jumps two percent? We could have a worse problem than the Downtown Eastside."

JUDY GRAVES shudders as we walk past an alley on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. There's a splash of colour at our feet. "I still find that really disturbing: 25 years, and I cannot get used to blood on the sidewalk."

You see a lot of things here that you won't see elsewhere in Canada, but what isn't obvious is how far-flung this urban jungle has become. The poverty, addiction, and violence found here--often graphic and extreme--are now elsewhere. As a regional underclass grows amid harsh economic forces and a dearth of concerted federal-provincial policy, the rest of Greater Vancouver is simply catching up with Hastings and Main. If you look close enough, you can see a place that's not isolated in its decay but highly networked within a broader, evolving phenomenon of hidden poverty.

It wasn't all that long ago that the DES resembled other Canadian neighbourhoods. Graves, a long-time outreach worker with the Housing Centre at City Hall, recalls the humble beginnings of the country's most notorious community. "When I started working here, the neighbourhood was really not bad," she says as we walk the quiet side streets north of East Hastings. "And then after 1986, our coworkers started getting attacked in the alley at night; everything changed. We became a world-class city, and concurrently we got world-class drug trade."

Graves feels that this place has been oversold as the wellspring of the GVRD's social ills. "Just because this is a bigger city and because it is served up on the half-shell on the Downtown Eastside, people come here because it is so easy to do media," she says. Just last night, she toured another television reporter around Hastings and Main. "But the bigger issues are actually outside of Vancouver, in the smaller municipalities. In Surrey, for example; Surrey is huge."

Youth and aboriginals are a big part of this new wave of regional homeless, just as students and young middle-class homeowners find themselves increasingly at risk. "We're seeing a large number of people having to drop out of college and university because they cannot get decent housing," she says. "Even security guards at UBC are finding the students sleeping overnight in the buildings, just crashed."

At one time, Vancouver's image of homelessness was the old men who frequented the taverns of Hastings. But today, the demographic has fractured and diversified. "Most of the people lying on the street are under 35," Graves says, sadly, as we pass by another doorway cluttered with sleeping bags. "It seems to take people much, much longer to actually establish themselves now. It's taking people now into their 30s and sometimes into their 40s to get to the point where they can establish a home-base apartment and a job they can count on. It's really a big change."

As Graves shows me the neglected corners of the DES, a question emerges: why is it that

governments tend to treat homelessness as an individual affliction, pumping money into individualized emergency response, when the drugs, homelessness, and poverty are increasingly connected elsewhere?

In other words, the woes of the DES are not unlike those of a developing nation, where foreign aid workers parachute in from more affluent neighbourhoods, drug money is exported through a complex and illicit network, and natural resources--in this case valuable downtown real estate--sometimes fall prey to offshore speculation and control.

"The people that make the decisions about the programs for this area are actually afraid to walk in it," Graves says. "So they don't get familiar with what would actually make a difference in thinking in terms of how people live and what they would like."

Likewise, municipal, federal, and provincial governments create artificial borders and arbitrary rules that don't reflect the nomadic reality of homelessness. Over at the Lookout Emergency Aid Society shelter on Alexander Street in the DES, manager Al Mitchell vents his frustration. "They will send us somebody from Surrey to Vancouver to stay here, for example, but they won't provide them with the means to get back out for an appointment," he says. "People are working at their little mandate and their end of the world, and as soon as you reach a geographic boundary, it's like they stop thinking there's a problem anymore."

Talk with enough shelter workers and it becomes apparent that the number-one barrier to homeless solutions isn't lack of resources, it's leadership. "Is it a surprise that 20 to 30 percent of my people here in Vancouver are coming to me from Surrey, or a youth shelter is running 70 percent Surrey kids in Vancouver?" Mitchell asks as he greets the evening rush. "Our problem is that we are Balkanized into municipalities that all just want to solve their little perception of the problem. We don't have a regional solution."

BESIDES ITS BLATANT street trade in opiates and amphetamines, the amazing thing about the Downtown Eastside is the number of people and organizations that have mobilized to help. There are many missions, representing the most arcane religious denominations, plus a long list of charities, nonprofits, and government organizations that provide all manner of service and assistance.

The "poverty industry" is a recurrent phrase that describes the evolution of the welfare state into a monolithic maze of institutions, well-paid jobs, and seemingly random acts of kindness. More people have begun to question the apparently scattershot provision of aid and charity. And although you won't necessarily hear this complaint from high-minded newspapers and progressive politicians, you will hear it, with growing frequency, from the homeless themselves.

Sitting quietly in downtown's Oppenheimer Park, a couple from Coquitlam considers an uncertain future. They travelled downtown in search of food and psychiatric help, and after a full day's effort, all they have is a bag of stale doughnuts, a few cans of liquid nutritional supplement, and several doses of Valium. "You go to a church and they say, 'We'll help you once, and don't bother us; we don't have a regular food bank,' " says David Daigneault, who suffers from a panic disorder. "Then the [social] worker says, 'Well, go down into Vancouver; go down to the East Side.' Then mental health says, 'Go down to the East Side; that's where all the money's being poured in because they are cutting back everywhere else.' And this is what we're going through. It's just not fair, right?"

He can hardly contain his frustration at the system. David--college-educated with a background in international development--and his wife, Wanda Horne, articulate their desire to escape welfare altogether. "It's like every little group down here is out for themselves, and every little private group is trying to get their piece of the pie, and none of these places are connected," he says. "And until--in my opinion, for whatever it's worth--until that starts happening, this problem is always going to be there."

Across Canada, the leading response to growth in homelessness has been to build more emergency shelters. An estimated two to three new emergency shelters opened every month in Canada during the late 1990s. When the federal government eliminated its social-housing program in 1993, only B.C. and Quebec soldiered on. And now, with a virtual freeze on funding for such affordable housing in B.C., popular debate has returned to the public-housing question.

Locally, there is much enthusiasm: Coun. Jim Green notes that council is pressuring the federal and provincial governments to deliver a symbolic 2,010 units of social housing for B.C. by the time the Olympics roll around in six years. Coun. Tim Louis cautions against heedless construction--"We would fill up almost all the housing to be built with people coming in from other areas"--but he agrees that a number of provisions, from legalizing secondary suites to dipping into the city's endowment fund for housing capital, are all necessary.

Jim Leyden, a homeless advocate who helped organize the Woodward's occupation last year, argues that the city could simply require developers to include affordable housing in all new developments, as opposed to the current strategy of selective incentives and tax rebates. "You would use the increased value of the downtown properties as a lever to make it happen," he argues. "If you build any kind of complex, a part of what you build must be social housing. So it spreads it out across the city."

There is even some talk of increased rent subsidies. "We can simply provide renters with the money they need," Louis says. "The shelter allowance is \$375 monthly and should be at least \$700. There's no market that supports current pricing." Lookout's Mitchell cautions that subsidies can reinforce inflated rental prices and don't deliver the kind of permanent asset that social housing represents.

The 2010 Olympics or not, demand for housing is immediate. "I think we need both the bricks and mortar and the rent supplements," says Linda Mix, a community legal worker at the Tenants Rights Action Coalition. "Not everyone needs to live in social housing. The waiting list here is three to five years to get into nonprofit housing, whereas if they were just able to get a rent supplement, they could rent an ordinary apartment. We need the whole continuum of housing."

Predictably, the politicians and advocates with the most enthusiasm and practical knowledge have the smallest budgets and the least political power. Nevertheless, the business case for antipoverty has become more clear. "I would bet that it costs \$40,000 per homeless person per year--doctors, emergency treatments, the whole thing," Green says. "But you can build social housing for as little as \$50,000 a unit."

Part of the challenge is changing the institutional reality: in the welfare business, the customer isn't always right. "I've lived in the Downtown Eastside for 33 years," Green notes. "And everyone is the world's expert on how to fix the poor. But the poor's knowledge is often discounted. That's why we have hundreds of thousands of dollars wasted on the downtown to test theories."

Getting ready for the long trip home to Coquitlam and another week filled with waiting rooms, forms, and social workers, Daigneault says he and his wife are fed up with the routine of poverty. "We should be caring for each other. I mean, there should be support groups, not just shallow organizations like the Living Room or Harbour Light or somewhere else where you walk in and you're treated like a number."

Warehousing the homeless and disciplining the poor will be a hard habit to break. "I mean, what did they do with leprosy once upon a time?" Daigneault asks. "Stick them on an island in the middle of nowhere. And we are still going through this."

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