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Date: 2/8/2021 4:31:43 PM
Subject: Memo: 2021 Homeless Count
Attachments: ACCS - GM (Memo to Mayor & Council) Homeless Count 2021 (2021-02-08).pdf

Dear Mayor and Council,

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 Homeless Count is not possible this year. Please see the attached memo from General Manager of Arts, Culture, and Community Services Sandra Singh that provides information about different data sources (municipal, provincial and community) that will be utilized to provide an update on the state of homelessness in 2021 as an alternative to conducting the annual Vancouver Homeless Count. A brief summary is as follows:

- Staff plan to utilize the following data streams to provide an insight into the state of homelessness in 2021, namely:
 - collecting shelter occupancy data from shelters and No Fixed Address (NFA) data from VPD and health authorities in Vancouver;
 - collecting NFA income assistance data from the Ministry of Social Development and Income Assistance. This will show how many people receiving income assistance are listed as currently experiencing homelessness;
 - conducting an online survey with outreach service providers for an update on street homelessness;
 - conducting an intersectional analysis of the 2020 Homeless Count data, particularly creating profiles to better understand the experiences of equity-deserving groups, such as the significantly overrepresented Indigenous and Black people; and
 - synthesizing and analyzing available data that is captured by different City, Provincial and community sources related to homelessness.
- Staff will synthesize the above data and report to Council with an update on the state of homelessness in Q3.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Sandra Singh (Sandra.Singh@vancouver.ca).

Best,
Paul

Paul Mochrie (he/him)
Acting City Manager
City of Vancouver
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The City of Vancouver acknowledges that it is situated on the unceded traditional territories of the xʷməŋəm (Musqueam), ləwú 7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətəl (Tseil-Waututh) Nations.

MEMORANDUM

February 8, 2021

TO: Mayor and Council

CC: Paul Mochrie, Acting City Manager
Karen Levitt, Deputy City Manager
Lynda Graves, Administration Services Manager, City Manager's Office
Maria Pontikis, Director, Civic Engagement and Communications
Rosemary Hagiwara, Acting City Clerk
Anita Zaenker, Chief of Staff, Mayor's Office
Neil Monckton, Chief of Staff, Mayor's Office
Alvin Singh, Communications Director, Mayor's Office
Celine Mauboules, Acting Managing Director of Homelessness Services and Affordable Housing Projects

FROM: Sandra Singh
General Manager, Arts, Culture and Community Services

SUBJECT: Alternatives to Homeless Count 2021 amid COVID-19 Pandemic

PURPOSE

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 Homeless Count is not possible this year. The purpose of this memo is to share highlights of different data sources (municipal, provincial and community) that will be utilized to provide an update on the state of homelessness in 2021 as an alternative to conducting the annual Vancouver Homeless Count.

BACKGROUND

The Homeless Count

The City of Vancouver has been conducting an annual Homeless Count since 2010 to provide data on the state of homelessness in the intervening years of the triennial Metro Vancouver Homeless Counts. Despite limitations in the Point-in-Time methodology, the Homeless Count provides important information about the number and profile of people who are experiencing homelessness in Vancouver. The City uses this data to inform its policies, as well as funding and supports requests to senior government.

On March 3 and 4, 2020 the City of Vancouver participated in the Metro Vancouver Homeless Count, which was carried out in the very early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in BC, and prior to the Province and the City of Vancouver declaring a State of Emergency. As such, it did not impact the planning or data collection of the Count, including the training and deployment of over 500 volunteers in Vancouver alone who interviewed people experiencing homelessness in shelters and on the street across the city.

The 2020 Count found that 2,095 residents in Vancouver identified as experiencing homelessness (compared to 2,223 in 2019), 547 people were living unsheltered on the street and 1,548 people were living in sheltered locations, including emergency shelters, detox centres, safe houses, and hospitals, with no fixed address. The results of the Homeless Count were [presented](#) to Council on October 7, 2020 as part of the Homelessness and Supportive Housing Strategy.

COVID-19 Pandemic

The Province of British Columbia declared a State of Emergency on March 18 and the City of Vancouver followed on March 19, both which are still in effect to date. Due to the transmission nature of COVID-19, Provincial and regional public health authorities have significantly limited (and in certain circumstances prohibited) in-person congregations, and implemented physical distancing and hygiene guidelines to residents, businesses, and community service providers. Data on COVID-19 transmission levels for specific sub-groups is not available from the health authorities, however with the dual public health emergencies of the pandemic and the overdose crisis we know that many people experiencing homelessness have higher rates of health concerns and may be at greater risk if exposed to COVID-19.

These restrictions have also impacted service provision to people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, including:

- The implementation of “no guest” policies at some SROs, supportive housing units and affordable housing buildings impacted couch surfers and forced many to resort to street homelessness;
- many day respite spaces (community centres, libraries, outreach drop-in programs, etc.) had to temporarily close or significantly limit their occupancy and usage, particularly hygiene and washroom access;
- shelter occupancy levels were lowered to comply with physical distancing requirements, as per Public Health mandates;
- some low-cost housing operators temporarily suspended new tenant intakes at the beginning of the pandemic;
- changes to the operation models of many outreach providers and meal service providers to comply with safety regulations for staff and clients – this often included limited services and an increased difficulty in accessing food for individuals in need;
- social isolation for people living alone, in SROs, including seniors, people with disabilities, and chronic health conditions.

The provincial health officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry, announced on January 5, 2021 that people experiencing homelessness are a priority population for receiving the vaccination, along with health-care workers and at-risk seniors. In late January, Vancouver Coastal Health opened COVID Vaccine Clinics in the DTES targeting people experiencing homelessness, and those living in SROs and supportive housing. However, a clear timeline as to when the vaccination of this population will be completed is not clear.

Throughout the pandemic, the City’s Homelessness Services Outreach Team continue to connect with people experiencing homelessness to offer help in moving to a shelter or housing, when available. In March 2020, the City of Vancouver convened a public partner, cross-departmental team to consider how to address the anticipated needs of people who were likely to be impacted the most by the pandemic. The team’s work included improving hygiene and washroom access, ensuring access to food, improving access to income, improving access to safe and secure places to sleep, and supporting overdose prevention and safe spaces.

At the onset of the pandemic, the City also partnered with BC Housing and the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority to temporarily activate two of its community centres, Roundhouse and Coal Harbour Community Centres, as temporary Emergency Response Centres (ERCs) to create additional shelter capacity for people experiencing homelessness that needed a safe and supportive space during the COVID-19 pandemic. These ERCs were deactivated in June 2020 and each guest was provided with housing accommodation depending on their needs and housing options available. Activating these spaces under an expedited timeline was an essential measure to protect all Vancouver residents, including those who are most vulnerable.

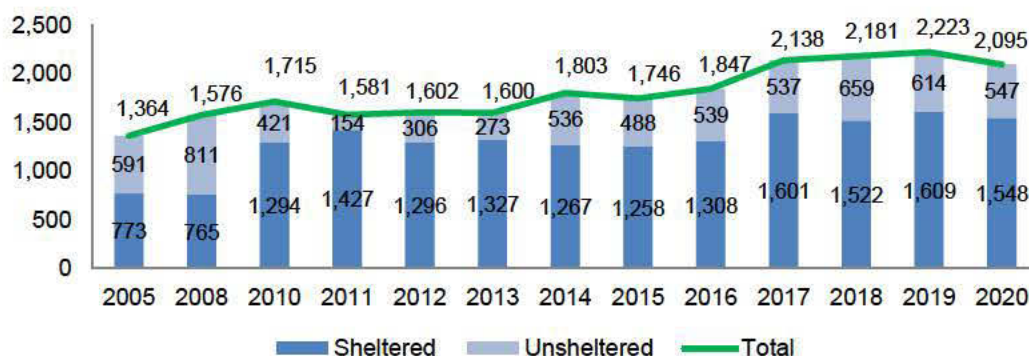
In summary, we have worked with our provincial and community partners to support and provide access to services for marginalized members of our community disproportionately impacted by COVID. However, as a result of public health orders related to the pandemic, the training and deployment of volunteers and activities related to carrying out the count this March is not possible.

DISCUSSION

While the Count will not be conducted in 2021 due to the pandemic, staff will be collecting alternate sources of data to paint a picture of homelessness. Staff believe this will paint a relatively consistent picture in our understanding of homelessness for the following reasons:

- Trend analysis of the Homeless Count data show that the majority of the data collected remain largely unchanged year-to-year, with an average 2-5% change in the total number of people experiencing homelessness over the last four years since the last regional Count (2017-2020).

Figure 1: Sheltered and Unsheltered Vancouver Population Experiencing Homelessness, 2005 to 2020



- Trend analysis of the demographic indicators in the Homeless Count data show minimal year-to-year fluctuations over the same period (2017-2020) as shown in Figures 2 to 4 below for gender, age, and Indigenous identity respectively.

Figure 2: Gender of respondents experiencing homelessness in Vancouver, 2005 to 2020

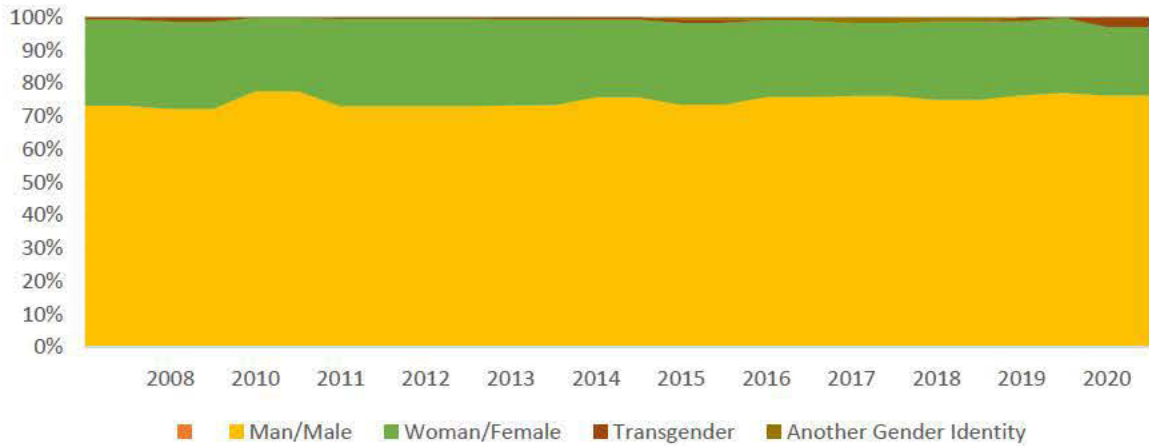


Figure 3: Age of respondents experiencing homelessness in Vancouver, 2005 to 2020

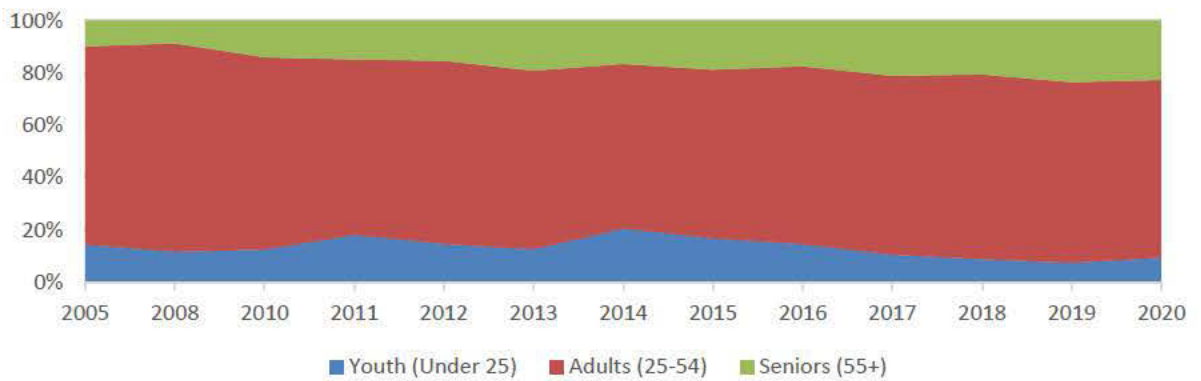
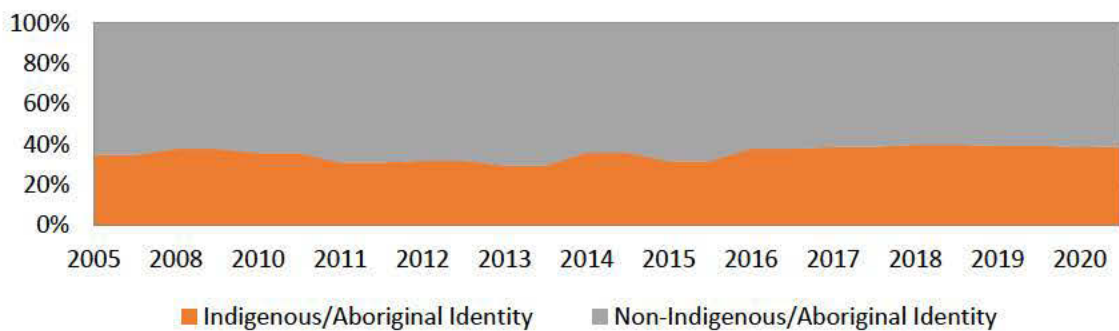


Figure 4: Indigenous identity of respondents experiencing homelessness in Vancouver, 2005 to 2020



Alternative Data Collection Sources for an Update on the State of Homelessness in 2021

While not moving forward with the Point-in-Time count in March, understanding the current state of homelessness is important particularly in light of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on people experiencing and at risk of homelessness. Staff plan to utilize the following data streams to provide an insight into the state of homelessness in 2021, namely:

1. Collecting shelter occupancy data from shelters and No Fixed Address (NFA) data from VPD and health authorities in Vancouver in a similar manner to the Homeless Count methodology;
2. Collecting NFA income assistance data from the Ministry of Social Development and Income Assistance. This will show how many people receiving income assistance are listed as currently experiencing homelessness;
3. Conducting an online survey with outreach service providers for an update on street homelessness;
4. Conducting an intersectional analysis of the 2020 Homeless Count data, particularly creating profiles to better understand the experiences of equity-deserving groups, such as the significantly overrepresented Indigenous and Black people;
5. Synthesizing and analyzing available data that is captured by different City, Provincial and community sources related to homelessness.

These are further elaborated below.

1. Shelter Occupancy and No Fixed Address Data

Staff will collect shelter occupancy data from permanent and temporary shelter providers as this utilizes existing shelter staff capturing their occupancy statistics on a designated night. The data will be captured in March to remain consistent with previous Counts which historically have been during that month. This data will also capture any COVID-related reduced shelter capacities and the number of turnaways on that night (if any). Staff believe it is safe to collect this data during the pandemic as it does not introduce volunteers or any external personnel into the facilities. Staff are engaging with BC Housing (as the funding agency for many shelters) and shelter providers to initiate and mobilize this data collection process.

Similarly, staff are connecting with Vancouver Police Department and Vancouver Coastal Health Authority for records of people in their facilities who are registered with No Fixed Address (NFA) on the same given night in March. This has also been part of the Homeless Count methodology.

2. NFA Income Assistance Data from the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction

Staff will reach out to the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction for records of people receiving various forms of income assistance who are recorded as NFA. This number has historically aligned with the Point-in-Time count data for individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness. The data will be particularly compared to the sources of income question in the count survey in previous years to closely examine correlations between both datasets.

3. Conduct an online survey with Indigenous, faith-based, and other outreach program providers for an update on street homelessness

As part of the Homeless Count, staff conduct an annual mapping workshop with outreach program providers to identify locations across the city where street homelessness is witnessed. In place of the in-person workshop, staff will reach out to these organizations with an online survey for an update of how street homelessness has changed over this year and their ability to support them. Collected data will include:

- Impact of the pandemic on their outreach services (if any);
- changes to the number of people experiencing street homelessness;
- changes to the locations in which people take refuge

4. Intersectional Analysis of the 2020 Homeless Count Data

As the 2020 Count was a Regional Count throughout Metro Vancouver, the reporting and data analysis focused on the region. The 2020 data shows that Indigenous people continue to be significantly overrepresented in the population experiencing homelessness (17.7 times more likely to experience homelessness) and the newly-collected race-based data shows that Black people are overrepresented as well (3.7 times more likely). It is crucial to further understand how these populations experience homelessness and highlight any service gaps through an intersectional analysis that is based on reconciliation and an equity lens.

5. Synthesizing and Analyzing Available Homelessness-Related Data

Several agencies, including the City of Vancouver, already collect data that is directly or indirectly related to homelessness that can be synthesized to shed light on the current state of homelessness in Vancouver and act as a proxy for the Homeless Count data this year. The following table outlines the planned data sources and the homelessness-related indicators that can be extracted to inform this scope of work. The data sources are divided into Tier 1 and Tier 2 sources based on the robustness of the data and the ability to direct conclusions towards the state of homelessness. The “Sheltered, Unsheltered or at Risk of Homelessness” column indicates which population the data provides insight into. Where possible, staff will collect this data for 2019, 2020 and 2021 to establish trend analysis and compare to previous Homeless Count data.

Table 1: Available Homelessness-Related Data Sources

Data Source	Indicators Extracted	Sheltered, Unsheltered or at Risk of Homelessness	Notes
Tier 1 Data Sources			
City of Vancouver Homelessness Outreach Team	Metrics related to the clients served daily by the Outreach Team: - Total number of clients served - Total number of clients served for the first time – new to the service	Sheltered, unsheltered and at risk of homelessness	This data is extracted from the Homeless Individual and Families Information System (HIFIS). This data is periodically reported to internal and public-facing dashboards, the budget book, and to Council.

Data Source	Indicators Extracted	Sheltered, Unsheltered or at Risk of Homelessness	Notes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Total number of housing placements - Housing retention of clients placed or supported to remain housed after 6 months - ID items applied for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gender - Age - Indigenous Identity 		
Downtown Eastside Women's Centre (DEWC) Women in Homelessness Needs Assessment Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Impacts of the pandemic on housing insecurity and state of homelessness of women - Barriers that impact homelessness for women in the DTES - Identify resources to assist women to obtain and maintain housing 	Sheltered and street homelessness	<p>The DEWC obtained HAW grants in 2020 and 2021 to conduct a needs assessment report on homelessness for women in the DTES. This data will provide insightful first-hand accounts from women experiencing or at risk of homelessness, some of whom may not have been captured in the Count.</p>
Tier 2 Data Sources			
311 Homelessness-Related Cases	<p>Records of citizen feedback related to homelessness including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Homelessness - Homeless cases by Park Rangers - Encampments - Feces - Discarded needles 	Sheltered and unsheltered	<p>It is important to point out the limitations of this dataset:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Possible duplicate feedback on the same incident - Not all feedback is exclusively related to homelessness (e.g. substance use related). <p>As such this data will be used to examine any significant changes in trends.</p>
Vancouver Rent Bank	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Number of applications for housing-related loans per month from 	Sheltered, unsheltered and at risk of homelessness	<p>The Rent Bank offers a one-time housing grant or support with essential utilities and basic needs to</p>

Data Source	Indicators Extracted	Sheltered, Unsheltered or at Risk of Homelessness	Notes
	March 2020 to March 2021 - Number of approved loans - Demographic and income level data of applicants (if possible)		individuals at risk of eviction or experiencing homelessness and need support securing housing. While this does not speak exclusively to the state of people experiencing homelessness, it will provide insight into very low-income households experiencing increasing financial strains due to COVID.
Eviction Data from the Renters Office and Renter-Serving and Legal Advocacy Non-Profits	- Number of evictions per month from March 2020 to March 2021 - Explore additional available data	At risk of homelessness	Staff will collaborate with the Renters Office that has been collecting and tracking statistics since March 2020 on the number and nature of COVID-related enquiries from Vancouver renters from five renter-serving and legal advocacy non-profits.
Data from the Hygiene Strategy	- Number of hygiene-related facilities installed between March 2020 and March 2021 - Usage data available (number of visitors/day, demographic data, etc.)	Sheltered and unsheltered	Staff will work with Social Policy group to obtain data around the usage of hygiene facilities (porta potties, washroom trailers, etc.)

Limitations to this Approach

There is a wealth of information in the data sources outlined above, however it is prudent to recognize the limitations to this approach in comparison to the Point-in-Time Homeless Count:

- Data will not be collected directly from people experiencing homelessness (with the exception of the DEWC Women Survey). Everyone’s journey into and through homelessness is unique and first-person accounts about the pandemic’s impact on people experiencing homelessness will not be directly captured in this alternative approach. Unfortunately, this is an unprecedented time and the COVID transmission safety concerns and following Public Health direction prevent

the necessary training and deployment of 500 volunteers across Vancouver to conduct in-person interviews with over 1,000 people experiencing homelessness.

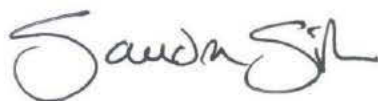
- Demographic data will not be available from all data sources listed above. However as illustrated earlier, historic count data has shown that many of these indicators remain largely unchanged from year-to-year.
- The Homeless Count provides a valuable opportunity to highlight homelessness in the Vancouver public realm. Volunteers have an opportunity to have one-on-one conversations with people with a variety of lived experiences. Staff always receive great feedback from volunteers about their experience in the Count and the benefit they gained from the sensitivity training and in-person interactions that at times dispel held stereotypes and stigmatization they may have had of this population. The planned data collection approach in this memo does not allow for this human interaction, however it is a unique time and public safety is of the highest priority. Staff will also continue to engage with the broader community on the causes and solutions to homelessness.

Timeline

Task	Timeline
Initiate contact with the outlined agencies and prepare any necessary data sharing agreements	February 2021
Data collection	March – May
Data analysis	May – June
Report writing	July – August
Present findings to Council and the public	September 2021

FINAL REMARKS

In light of the current COVID-19 pandemic, staff are planning an update on the state of homelessness in 2021 through the data sources outlined in this memo in lieu of conducting the annual Vancouver Homeless Count. If Council has any further questions or needs additional information, please feel free to contact me.



Sandra Singh
General Manager, Arts, Culture and Community Services

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