

# Opinion: Homelessness: We all pay

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A homeless man sleeps in a doorway in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. PHOTO BY JONATHAN HAYWARD /THE CANADIAN PRESS

I have the privilege of living in a lovely downtown Vancouver neighbourhood. The late-fall mornings are crisp and fresh and, even in a light drizzle, it's a pleasant place to live, work and walk. But here's something that makes me reject any claim that Vancouver is one of the world's most "liveable" cities: On one recent early morning coffee run, I counted 13 homeless people sleeping in nooks and doorways — slumped in the shadows of the million-dollar condos that rise in every direction.

I know that's anecdotal, and it's not always that bad. But I also know, from the 2017 Homeless Count in Metro Vancouver, that the statistically valid number of homeless people in the region is over 3,600. There are more than 2,100 in the City of Vancouver alone. That is the city, you'll recall, where Mayor Gregor Robertson first got elected in 2008 on a promise to end

homelessness by 2015. And yet, in 2017, homelessness is up 30 per cent in the last three years and at the highest rate since the first Metro-wide count in 2002.

What, you might ask, was candidate Robertson thinking? Any career politician might have warned him that homelessness is a sticky issue and that clear, measurable campaign promises are a terrible risk come re-election time. Perhaps he thought that the City had more effective options for addressing the problem. Perhaps he imagined that senior levels of government would consider the injustice — and the danger and expense of allowing homelessness to continue — and they would step up with adequate resources. Perhaps, you might say, he was just that naïve.

But here's the harsh truth of homelessness, for the well-housed among us: whatever money the three levels of government save by not spending adequately on social housing instantly goes up in flames — and in much greater amounts — in other expensive services. For example, as reported in the 2017 Homeless Count in Metro Vancouver, the number-one service consumed by homeless people is “Emergency Room.” Number 3 is “Ambulance.” Homeless people are so likely to wind up in hospitals or jails that the report actually refers to them as “no-fixed-address sites.”

That's part of the argument that the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness made in a 2013 report showing that homelessness in Canada costs taxpayers more than \$7 billion a year. And it's an easy argument to accept. Where (in 2013) government could underwrite a social housing bed for \$199 a month or issue shelter allowance for a monthly outlay of \$710; a month in a shelter bed costs \$1,932; a month in a provincial jail, \$4,333; and a month in hospital, \$10,900.

Consider, as well, the increased risk we all face by leaving hundreds or thousands of fellow citizens to waste on the street. And in this, I don't want to wave a panicked finger or set off a police campaign to move the homeless from my gentrified environment to someplace less savory. On the contrary, I am generally surprised by how hard street people work to stay out of the way. But there is no real security, for any of us, in a community that drives even a small portion of its inhabitants to desperation. There is no real protection from, say, the antibiotic-resistant tuberculosis that gestates in a community of people whose capacity to resist infection has been stripped bare.

So, for those of us in the planning and development community — and really for all residents who care about living in a sustainable city — homelessness is not a side issue. A city that doesn't work for its most vulnerable residents, doesn't work for anyone. Homelessness is a condition we simply cannot accept, or ignore, while we blame someone else. It is the toxic result of our own inaction. As citizens, and as taxpayers, we all must help fix this, because letting it continue exacts too high a cost.

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