METRO VANCOUVER HOMELESS COUNT ASSESSMENT

JANUARY 2010

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METRO VANCOUVER HOMELESS COUNT ASSESSMENT

PREPARED BY THE SOCIAL PLANNING AND RESEARCH COUNCIL OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

CO-AUTHORS MARGARET EBERLE, SCOTT GRAHAM & MICHAEL GOLDBERG
DESIGN & LAYOUT JOANNE CHEUNG
COVER PHOTOGRAPHY BYRON BARRETT *byronbar@hotmail.com*

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Co-Authors: Margaret Eberle, Scott Graham and Michael Goldberg

III. Executive Summary

Context and Objectives

The Metro Vancouver Homeless Count (MVHC) has been a triennial community-based research project that was conducted in 2002, 2005, and 2008. The three MVHC were united by the same twenty four hour point-in-time methodology and a common purpose to:

- enumerate homeless persons by municipality in Metro Vancouver;
- create demographic profiles of those enumerated on the day of the count; and,
- identify trends related to each homeless count (especially the 2008 count).

The MVHC Assessment was designed to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of the MVHC and identify strategies that could improve the MVHC in the future. As such, the purpose of the MVHC Assessment is to examine the efficacy of the MVHC from a methodological and implementation perspective.

Methodology

The MVHC Assessment examines eleven aspects of the MVHC, including: frequency and timing, geographic coverage, method, governance, volunteer recruitment and communication, volunteer training, count day volunteer coordination and logistics, use of MVHC findings and community mobilization, pre-count and post-count communications, ethical issues, funding and budgetary issues.

The MVHC Assessment employed a three part qualitative research method that consisted of a comparison of the method used in the homeless counts in Vancouver, Calgary and Toronto, interviews with key stakeholder and a focus group with members of the 2008 MVHC project team.

Key Findings and Recommendations

It is important to note that the nature of many of the recommendations is contingent on the response to the question about the overall purpose of the MVHC. Is the MVHC primarily a research project, a public awareness-raising and community mobilization initiative, or both? The answer to this question has serious implications for many elements of the MVHC and, as such, we strongly encourage the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness (RSCH) to first clearly articulate the overall primary and secondary purposes of the MVHC. In so doing, many of the choices about how to improve the MVHC will become clearer.

1. Frequency and timing

a) The MVHC should be conducted every three years until it is deemed by the RSCH that census type data on the homeless is not necessary.

b) Improving the quality of the existing MVHC spring count is of greater importance than designing and implementing a "one off summer homeless count." However, if the spring MVHC is adequately resourced, then a "one-off homeless count" should be considered to determine if differences exist between summer and winter homeless populations.

2. Geographic coverage

a) Collaboration on homeless counts should take place between Metro Vancouver, the Fraser Valley and Victoria.

b) A more systematic method should be developed to record the changes in the local areas where street homeless people are found/ searched for each iteration of the count. This would enable better comparisons between counts.

3. Method

a) The point in time count approach should be maintained.

b) The public should be better educated about difference between point and period counts.

c) BC Housing and others should develop a Management Information System that records unique individuals and can produce period prevalence data for the sheltered homeless. In the meantime, the 24-hour count figures could be annualized using a formula developed in the US.[1]

d) Although there was some support for the idea of counting homeless people based on appearance, the MVHC should not adopt the practice of counting people who have not completed at least part of the survey, even if such people display homeless behavior. However, interviewers should record the number of people they found who appear homeless but did not participate in the interview (either because they were sleeping or they refused) and this number should be provided in the report.

e) Consideration should be given to adopting sampling procedures in outlying areas with a low density of homeless persons as is the case in Toronto.

f) The RSCH should develop partnerships with health authorities/ hospitals, correctional institutes, detox centres, and recovery homes well in advance of the next count. Such partnerships may assist in gaining their participation during the next count so that homeless people staying with them on count day will be included.

1. Martha R. Burt and Carol Wilkins, Estimating the Need: Projecting from Point-in-Time to Annual Estimates of the Number of Homeless People in a Community and Using this Information to Plan for Permanent Supportive (Housing Corporation for Supportive Housing, 2005), www.csh.org (accessed June 20, 2009).

g) There are two options to address the difficulty in enumerating all shelter clients. The first and most ideal is to use BC Housing's shelter database for shelter clients on count day. The second option is placing volunteer interviewers in all shelters, which will require more volunteers and more coordination, and thus will be more costly.

h) The length of the survey should remain unchanged with some minor content changes.

i) No action on hidden homelessness is recommended. Neither the MVHC nor any other Canadian count is designed to capture the hidden homeless other than at service locations.

4. Governance

a) The elaborate committee structure could be streamlined and roles clarified. A single committee with responsibility for planning, managing, implementing and reporting on the count is recommended with one lead staff person with day-to-day responsibility.

b) In addition, a strategy for liaison between the RSCH, the Homeless Count Coordinating Committee (HCCC), and the consultants should be developed.

c) A common and consistent role should be found for the sub-regional tables in the implementation of the count. The RSCH should establish a mechanism to clarify the role and communication responsibilities between sub-regional planning tables and the RSCH and its committees.

d) The decision to have a homeless count should be made at least twelve months prior to count day to provide adequate lead time to implement the count. If a consultant is hired, the contract should be signed seven to eight months prior to count day.

5. Volunteer recruitment and communication

a) If the primary goal of the count includes raising public awareness, then volunteer recruitment should include a public process and every area should use and/or develop sub-regional tables to assist in the management of volunteer recruitment and communication.

b) Volunteer recruitment should be targeted if the goal of the MVHC is primarily or strictly a research project.

c) Outreach workers are a central contributor to the count process and should be involved in the survey process as much as possible.

6. Volunteer training

a) Persons with experience interacting with the homeless population or who have had previous count training should be able to attend a brief training session on administering the survey.

b) Design future training sessions so they are flexible enough to include contextual factors particular to the local jurisdiction.

c) Develop a train-the-trainers session for sub-regional coordinators who can then train the volunteers in their sub-region.

d) Consider using technologies such as video conferencing or videos to deliver the repetitive aspects of the training in multiple locations.

7. Count day volunteer coordination and logistics

a) Develop a strategy for engaging sub-regional tables six months before the count. The strategy could include an assessment of and capacity building for sub-regional tables wherever necessary.

b) Articulate the structure and system for coordinating volunteers on count day.

c) Create staffed support centres in each sub-region, and perhaps several in the City of Vancouver.

d) Provide a template to sub-regional tables on ways that information about referral agencies can be distributed to homeless people during the MVHC.

e) Develop a template for a volunteer appreciation event that could be hosted in the sub-regions. Alternatively, consider the development and electronic distribution of a follow up newsletter to volunteers with facts about the count and stories about volunteer experiences on count day.

8. Count findings and community mobilization

a) Explore options for validating count results such as measuring the rate of recapture later on count day.

b) Develop a policy on releasing the MVHC findings that ensures both government and civil society organizations are provided findings at the same time.

c) Produce two reports of the MVHC findings: a technical research report and a public report.

d) Prior to embarking on the next count, consider how count findings will be used and assess progress in achieving regional goals since the last count.

e) If community mobilization is determined to be a goal of the count, consider how to integrate community involvement in RSCH activities following the count.

9. Pre-count and post-count communications

a) A communication strategy ought to be developed once the RSCH decides if the MVHC is mainly a research project, a public awareness raising campaign or both.

b) Release all MVHC results at one press conference instead of having two results releases and two press conferences.

c) Develop creative ways of emphasizing that the results of the MVHC are an undercount.

d) The RSCH could consider developing a short documentary film that could accompany the count report.

10. Ethical issues

a) The media ban should remain in place to protect the privacy of homeless people who participate in the MVHC.

b) Mock interviews that media can use as stock footage should be arranged as part of the count implementation.

11. Funding and budgetary issues

a) Reassess the resources that are required to conduct the MVHC.

b) The RSCH should examine the benefits and costs of providing a voucher to those who complete the count.

c) Given the prospect of increasing costs associated with conducting the MVHC, the RSCH should consider the possibility of pursuing corporate sponsorship for the MVHC.

1. Introduction

The Metro Vancouver Homeless Count (MVHC) has been a triennial community-based research project that was conducted in 2002, 2005, and 2008. The three MVHC were united by the same twenty four hour point-in-time methodology and a common purpose to:

- enumerate homeless persons by municipality in Metro Vancouver;
- create demographic profiles of those enumerated on the day of the count; and,
- identify trends related to each homeless Count (especially the 2008 count).

Following the 2008 MVHC, key stakeholders were invited to complete an online evaluation survey to provide feedback on the count, sharing some of the lessons learned, and offering suggestions for improving the next count. The findings indicate that implementing the MVHC is becoming more challenging due to the scale of the initiative.

The MVHC Assessment was designed to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of the MVHC and identify strategies that could improve the MVHC in the future. As such, the purpose of the MVHC Assessment is to examine the efficacy of the MVHC from a methodological and implementation perspective, particularly in light of the scope of issues raised in the 2008 MVHC online evaluation survey and the existence of alternative homeless count approaches from Calgary and Toronto.

This report features the findings of the MVHC Assessment. First, the assessment methodology is explained. An analysis of the interview findings comes next, which is followed by a short comparative review of the methodological characteristics of the Metro Vancouver, Calgary, and Toronto homeless counts. A summary discussion and recommendations for improving the MVHC comprise the second to last section of this report. A bibliography is the final section, which is followed by an appendix containing the interview questionnaire.

2. Methodology

The MVHC Assessment examines eleven aspects of the Metro Vancouver Homeless Count, including:

- Frequency and timing
- Geographic coverage
- Method
- Governance
- Volunteer recruitment and communication
- Volunteer training
- Count day volunteer coordination and logistics
- Use of MVHC findings and community mobilization
- Pre-count and post-count communications
- Ethical issues
- Funding and budgetary issues

The MVHC Assessment employed a three part qualitative research method that consisted of a comparison of the method used in the homeless counts in Vancouver, Calgary and Toronto, key stakeholder interviews and a focus group with members of the MVHC project team.

Twenty MVHC stakeholders participated in the Assessment interview process[2] and they represented a cross section of different types of stakeholders in the Count, including:

- Six members of the Homeless Count Coordinating Committee (HCCC);
- Four representatives of organizations that use homeless count data in their planning, education and policy development work;
- Two representatives of shelter organizations that facilitated access to the homeless population during the MVHC;
- Three area coordinators;
- Five volunteer interviewers.

2. Many of the Assessment participants were connected to one of the following thirteen organizations: Metro Vancouver, BC Housing, Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, McCreary Centre Society, City of Coquitlam, BC Civil Liberties Society, Salvation Army, Union Gospel Mission, Kla'How'Eya, Helping Spirit Lodge Society, North Vancouver Bottle Depot, Tri Cities Housing Coalition, and the Alouette Home Start Society.

Of the twenty people that participated in the interview process, nine of them had been involved in more than one MVHC.

Most interview participants were randomly selected using volunteer and area coordinator lists from the 2008 MVHC. Users of count data and members of the HCCC were selected by the assessment project team based on a history of involvement with the MVHC and their availability over the summer holidays.

All interviews were conducted over the telephone and were digitally recorded for accuracy. Consent to record was received for all interviews. A questionnaire was used to conduct the interviews, which can be found in Appendix A. Interview responses were thematically analyzed.

One focus group was conducted as part of the MVHC Assessment. Six members of the MVHC project team participated in the focus group, which was designed to elicit input on the draft recommendations. The data from the focus group was integrated into the final iteration of the recommendations for the MVHC.

3. Analysis of Interview Data

This section presents the MVHC definition of homelessness and analyzes interview responses according to the following themes: Frequency and timing, geographic coverage, method, governance, volunteer recruitment and communication, volunteer training, count day volunteer coordination and logistics, use of MVHC findings and community mobilization, pre-count and post-count communications, ethical issues, as well as funding and budgetary issues.

Each subsection commences with a brief description of the given aspect of the MVHC, which is followed by the analysis of interviewee responses.

3.1. MVHC Definition of Homelessness

The MVHC defined homelessness in the following terms:

> Someone was considered homeless for the purpose of the MVHC count if they did not have a place of their own where they could expect to stay for more than 30 days and if they did not pay rent.

This included people who:

- had no physical shelter and were staying on the street, in doorways, in parkades, in parks, on beaches, etc.;
- were temporarily sheltered in emergency shelters, safe houses for youth, or transition houses for women and their children fleeing violence;
- were staying at a friend's place where they did not pay rent.

For example, someone who stayed in a garage would be considered homeless, because they do not pay rent, even if they considered the garage to be their home. Someone who stayed in an emergency shelter usually cannot stay for more than thirty days, and was therefore homeless.

Someone who stayed at a friend's place where they did not pay rent was also homeless for the purposes of this count because they had no security of tenure.

3.2. Frequency and Timing

The frequency of the MVHC is the amount of time that passes between counts and the timing refers to the date when the count is conducted.

Frequency

The MVHC has been conducted every three years, and was conducted in January, 2002 and in March, 2005 and 2008. During the key stakeholder interview process, respondents were asked if three years is the right amount of time between counts in Metro Vancouver, and if not, then how much time should lapse between counts. The majority of respondents stated that a three year cycle is adequate, especially for a regional count.

One respondent noted: "It's just a balancing act of amount of resources vs. payoff. You get to the two year mark and data starts to feel old and we're beginning to lose the sense of it, but on the other hand it's a resource intensive process so three years is okay for a check-in." Another interviewee remarked: "I think it's sufficient on a regional scope." However, this respondent also noted: "I know there are lots of groups who want more detailed data."

Several respondents who felt three years was adequate also indicated that a two year count cycle would be ideal. One interviewee put it in the following terms: "Three years is fine, two years would be better."

Although the majority of respondents agreed that the three year time gap between counts was adequate, some respondents thought that counts should be separated by two years. "[The MVHC should take place] every couple of years, especially now because of increases in the amount of people we're finding homeless."

Timing

The MVHC is generally implemented in the month of March (expect in 2002). March has been selected as the month for the count because it coincides with the operating timeframe of the cold wet weather strategy in Metro Vancouver (November to April) and allows critical planning to avoid the holiday period. March 11 was selected for the 2008 MVHC to avoid conflict with school spring break. In 2008, as in previous counts, the day of the count was selected prior to when income assistance cheques are issued, as this is a time when homeless people are most likely to seek service of some kind.

Interview participants were asked if March is a good month for doing the count, and if not, what month would be better and why. Although one respondent indicated that they did not know if March is a good month, the majority of respondents agreed that March is a good month for doing the MVHC. "One interviewee remarked that March is a good month "because it's a time when people are still in shelters and using services for homeless people." This same respondent also noted that March is a good month because it does not conflict with other initiatives related to homelessness such as Homelessness Action Week. One interviewee felt March was a good month because it allows for an accurate count of Aboriginal homeless people. Two respondents supported the idea of conducting the MVHC in March because "it allows for comparability."

Although the vast majority of interviewees agreed that March was a good month for the Count, many of these same respondents felt that having only one count in March failed to account for the homeless population in the summer. One interviewee stated that: "The volumes of homeless people are seasonally dependent. A higher number of homeless people would be found in the summer, because people do migrate to Vancouver during the summer…If you're looking at the core homeless population, then winter is the best time to do it. But if you're looking at the volume of services required for the homeless population over a full year, then you want to do it at more than one point in the year." A few respondents noted that March is a problematic month because it misses important changes in the homeless population. One interviewee noted that "there are two homeless populations: one is resident, one is transient. You miss a lot of people by doing this in March."

3.3. Geographic Coverage

The geographic scope of the MVHC profile is Metro Vancouver.[3] Interviewees were asked if they felt this is appropriate geographic coverage for the count. Comments such as, "yes, it's as good as we can do" and "I think it is fairly well covered" were consistently expressed by interviewees, indicating overall satisfaction with the current geographic scope of the MVHC. All but one respondent indicated that the geographic coverage of the MVHC was appropriate, stating: "I would say no; it should include the whole Fraser Valley not just [Metro Vancouver]."

Some assessment participants also recommended better coordination between the MVHC and other counts in BC, namely the Fraser Valley and Victoria counts.

A few participants advocated for a provincial homeless count, with one interviewee stating: "In the real big picture, the whole province should be done at the same time - that would really give us a good picture, a really good snapshot." Echoing this sentiment, another respondent expressed: "Ideally, coordinate whole province to do count on same day. Start with Metro, Fraser Valley and Victoria." The resource implications were not lost for one participant, who agreed with a provincial count but also emphasized the related need to "start exploring the possibility of funding for other major centres outside of the Lower Mainland."

In a different vein, one participant was concerned about missing areas that have not been pre-identified. This same respondent also noted "that between years, when new areas are identified, it's hard to know how much increase is due to an actual increase and how much is due to better coverage." To address this issue, this participant recommended: "documenting from count to count what are the new areas and then doing some sort of calculation around what the numbers would have been without those new areas and what's the number with them. This would lend more robustness to our findings."

3. All Metro Vancouver municipalities were canvassed for locations where homeless congregate. The following municipalities identified locations and were covered by the MVHC: Burnaby, City and Township of Langley, City of Vancouver and UBC, Coquitlam, Delta, District and City of North Vancouver, Maple Ridge/ Pitt Meadows, New Westminster, Port Coquitlam, Port Moody, Richmond, Surrey, West Vancouver, White Rock.

3.4. Method

The same method of enumerating the homeless population in Metro Vancouver has been used in the 2002, 2005 and 2008 MVHC. The two components of the 2008 count included:

1. The enumeration of all shelters, safe houses and transition houses for the night of March 10, called the night-time component.[4] This measured the size of the *sheltered homeless* population

2. The enumeration of locations where street/service homeless people may be found, such as outdoor congregating areas, meal programs and other services, during the hours of 5:30 am to midnight on March 11, 2008. This was designed to identify those homeless persons who had not spent the previous night in a shelter, safe house or transition house. This is called the daytime component and counts the *street/service homeless.*

There are several reasons why the numbers reported for the 2008 count, as well as the 2002 and 2005 counts, reflects an undercount of the actual homeless population in Metro Vancouver:

- Detox and recovery houses are not included in the count
- only sofa surfers who accessed services on count day are counted
- hospitals and jails are not included in the count
- three missing night-time facilities (2008 MVHC)
- people refusing to be interviewed
- families that double up with other families due to financial hardship were not included in the count if they did not access services on count day
- inability to screen everyone at some day-time locations with line-up

4. Shelters are asked to count as if the person was there as of 12:01 on March 11th (the night of March 10th).

Additionally, the figure produced in the MVHC is lower than the number of different people who experience homelessness over a period of time. Homelessness is often episodic. A point-in-time count does not capture the number of people that move in and out of homelessness throughout the course of a year.

Interview participants were asked questions about four aspects of the MVHC method, including: the twenty four hour point-in-time strategy, survey questionnaire, night time component and day time component. Below, descriptions of each element are presented along with respondents' views on these elements of the MVHC.

3.4.1. Twenty Four Hour Point-in-Time Strategy

The MVHC was designed to avoid double counting. The MVHC measures homelessness in the region at a point-in-time, one twenty four hour period (from 12:01 am to 11:59 pm). This contrasts with a period of time homeless count, which can determine, for example, how many people were homeless over the course of a year. A point-in-time count identifies how many homeless people were counted within one twenty four hour period. Interviewees were asked to indicate whether they think the twenty four hour period is a good time frame for enumerating the homeless population and, if not, what time frame would be better.

A majority of respondents stated that a twenty four hour period is a good time frame for conducting the MVHC, with one interviewee noting that "it's as good as any other [method]," and another noting "I don't see any way to do it better; it is a snapshot." Other respondents were more resigned to the twenty four hour period, asserting that "it's pretty limiting, but for a point-in-time count it makes sense within that methodology."

The most frequently noted reason for supporting the twenty four hour timeframe for the MVHC was because it has always been conducted in such a way. As one assessment participant remarked: "it's important to be consistent over time, so it should stay the same."

However, one respondent emphasized preserving the existing flexibility of the MVHC so it can continue to include some data that is collected outside of the twenty four hour period, such as data from the Kitsilano Community Centre, which collected data on the Saturday before the count in 2008. “We should be reasonable and flexible, but to the extent that it’s possible keep it to one day/twenty four hour period.”

One respondent noted that he agreed with the twenty four hour period count but advised that measures need to be in place to ensure that the single day is similar over time. To assist in this process, the respondent suggested that the MVHC should work in cooperation with “authorities like police, and bylaw inspections officers to ensure no unusual actions take place that day (i.e., ‘street sweeping’, road closures, etc.).”

Some respondents were not satisfied with the twenty four hour time period, contending that the count period should take place over a longer period of time. In the words of one assessment participant: “I understand why it’s done that way, but it’s challenging when volunteers run out of survey sheets, or are only able to capture some responses when in a large group. It would be good to return to that area the same time the next day. Expanding to a forty eight hour time would allow that, and allow return to shelters that hadn’t completed the surveys.” A couple of interview participants recommended that the count should take place over the course of a week: “I think [the twenty four hour period is] a thin slice. I think you need to do it over a week… It complicates data entry, but the simple truth is you’re missing a lot of people in a one day count.” For another respondent, the count should take place over a longer period of time because “you’re limiting accuracy of the survey by limiting it to one day.”

3.4.2. Survey Questionnaire

The MVHC survey consisted of 14 questions (17 questions for daytime questionnaire). Several areas were addressed by the survey, including demographics (e.g., gender, age, source of income), homelessness (e.g., length of time homeless, reasons for homelessness,) and health (e.g., self-reported types of health issues).[5]

While a core of questions have remained similar in all three counts, the interview questionnaire was modified in 2008 to try to examine the number of times homeless people used shelters in the past year and use of health services. Unfortunately, these questions did not work as intended so the limited data was not analyzed.

Interviewees were asked to provide their opinion on the content of the survey. A large majority of respondents reported satisfaction with the content of the survey. According to one assessment participant, the survey "was good – clear and simple." Others commented that "It's fairly comprehensive" and "I think the survey hit on everything." One participant expressed that the questions were "quite reasonable," while another interviewee expressed appreciation for the question about Aboriginal identity, stating: "I liked the sensitivity around the Aboriginal descent question." Again, another interviewee was pleased with the survey because it made it simple for "people…to share their situations."

Despite much praise for the survey, many assessment participants noted concerns about the lack of some questions in the survey and provided suggestions for future questions. One participant noted the lack of questions about citizenship: "I know that one concern is coming from the immigrant and refugee serving community that there's no questions concerning citizenship/immigrant/refugee status." The lack of a question about what homeless people need to stay housed was also noted: "In Toronto, they added questions around what do you need to stay housed. Additional questions around needs could be useful." Another interview participant suggested that

5. For the complete nighttime and daytime survey questionnaire, see: http://www.metrovancouver.org/planning/homelessness/Pages/Resources.aspx

the survey needs to "ask how many times have you gone for a job, tried to stop being homeless. We need to show that people are trying to get out of it."

One respondent recommended that the survey should try to collect more data on "what services are being accessed and which ones are helpful in gaining access to housing and support services. If we don't know how/if people engage, we don't know what services to shore up and where to direct funding and/or work with those services to make sure they're working on getting people back inside."
Some assessment participants noted that the survey had too many questions. One interviewee recommended "cutting back on the questions if possible rather than adding new ones." Another participant supported this idea by suggesting that the "demographic [questions] go into too much detail." In another instance, one respondent stated "…No more than 2-3 questions."

In addition to concerns about the length of the survey and the detail of some question sets, a couple of respondents also remarked that the self-reporting health questions are problematic because one can't fully trust self-reported health concerns (e.g., mental health, addiction)."

3.4.3. Night Time Component

The night time component is a service based count, which provides a count of the number of sheltered homeless people in a community.

The implementation of the night time component of the 2008 MVHC was preceded by updating lists of shelters, including cold wet weather facilities, safe houses and transition houses operating in Metro Vancouver. The lists included some facilities that are not strictly shelters but are open during the night to provide refuge for homeless people.

Once the lists were finalized, all noted facilities were sent a package of materials with instructions approximately two weeks in advance of the MVHC. Then, a few days before count day, all night-time providers were telephoned to ensure they received the package and to answer any questions they may have had about completing the forms. Those facilities that had not received or could not find their package were re-sent materials. The instructions requested that staff enumerate the persons who were in the shelter beginning at 12:01 am on March 11 and to add anyone who came to the shelter prior to daylight (around 5:00 am) on March 11.

Shelters were asked to complete a questionnaire for each individual similar to that used in the daytime component of the count in 2008 rather than a grid or table as had been used in 2002 and 2005. As in previous years, each night time facility was also asked to complete a Shelter Statistics form, indicating the total number of beds used that night and the number of people turned away (turnaways).

Shelters were asked if they would like volunteers to assist them with data collection on count night but few shelters responded. Thirty volunteers were recruited and trained to conduct interviews at six large shelters in Vancouver where circumstances make it difficult for staff to conduct interviews themselves. Interviews at these locations took place during the intake period of each shelter using the night time interview guide. Intake occurred from 4:00 pm to midnight on the evening of March 10. A Count volunteer conducted interviews either in a line up outside the shelter or inside the shelter itself after client intake to the shelter was completed.

In some cases, shelter staff were not able to collect information about each individual, resulting in incomplete coverage and/or incomplete questionnaires. Assessment participants were asked what they think would lead to more complete information from all shelters, transition houses and safe houses.

In a couple of cases, respondents felt the existing approach worked well, which was noted by one interview in the following way: "what was done last year was quite effective."

In a similar vein, one interviewee shared his positive experience: "I sat in a shelter this year and I think it was fairly effective." However, this same interviewee also recognized that "the shelters can usually give us a straight up number, but you ensure better data and the questions will be answered more fully with count volunteers."

The suggestion to have a larger role for volunteers in the shelters to conduct the interview was noted by a majority of assessment participants. One respondent suggested that all shelters, safe houses and transition houses should be covered by count volunteers. This same respondent noted that the schedule for volunteers at shelters should allow for fewer people to be present at a given shelter for longer periods of times. Another respondent also suggested that it's very important that the volunteers who work at the shelters have previous experience interacting with people who are homeless.

One interviewee suggested that "one of the things you'd need to do is find someone within the organization who has links to the people being counted. Almost a direct recruitment within participating organizations; get someone working in the agency to take information."

While many respondents commented upon the need for more volunteers in shelters, some interviewees shared ideas about the role of the shelters in ensuring the completion of questionnaires. One respondent suggested that the role of the shelters in the count could be strengthened if the shelters were provided resources to conduct the count, stating that "they are overstretched." Another assessment participant suggested that shelter funders could make the MVHC more of a priority for staff: "If it's only happening once every three years, maybe funders of the shelters could provide some assistance and direct them to be involved in this, so that they make sure we do get reports back." One interviewee also recommended finding ways to assess a shelter's capacity to undertake the count and provide support where necessary.

Another respondent representing a shelter suggested that "working with manager, team leader and frontline staff is the right way to go. The best way is if the person asking has some kind of relationship with the person being asked. The challenge is that some of the workers feel it's an invasion. Some of the clients, especially with mental health issues, get nervous about being asked questions."

Finally, one interviewee noted that in addition to increasing volunteer presence in shelters, the count project team should also rely more heavily on the BC housing database to ensure complete data.

3.4.4. Day Time Component

Overall coordination of the daytime count was provided by the MVHC project manager. Members of the consulting team and volunteer coordinators were assigned responsibility for coordinating the count in the different sub-regions in the Metro Vancouver area.

Six members of the consulting team were assigned to sub-regional areas as area coordinators, and three consultants from Infocus Consulting were responsible for coordinating the Aboriginal counts, including recruitment of Aboriginal volunteers.

Area coordinators worked with local Homelessness Planning tables (where they existed) and local service providers, homeless outreach workers, RCMP, Parks staff and Bylaw officers to identify areas to be covered during the count and in some cases, to recruit volunteers for each sub-region or municipality. Most area coordinators also recruited local coordinators. The local coordinators were also responsible for assigning volunteers to their routes, and getting them their count packages if they did not receive them at the training session.

The day-time component used a census approach to enumerate street/service homeless people at service and other locations throughout the region.

The preparatory work of the day time component involved working with local contacts to create an inventory of all locations throughout the region where homeless people congregate. As well, some interviewers were recruited from groups and organizations that work regularly with the homeless, such as outreach workers. Theoretically, if all of the locations were enumerated during all hours of March 11th, then the number of homeless missed would be very low. Under-coverage would only come from having missed a location with homeless people that went nowhere else that day and those who refused to be interviewed. Also, as enumeration progressed throughout the day, more and more people approached would fall into the 'previously screened' category, to the point where no new homeless people were being identified at the end of the day. It was, of course, not feasible to enumerate all locations during all hours.

To maximize coverage, the number of people screened and enumerated at each meal line-up location coincided with the peak hours of operation. Peak hour enumeration was also adopted for bottle depots and drop-ins where peak hours were known. Also, the paths leading from Stanley Park were done early in the morning since that is when people leave the park. A search was also done in the afternoon for those who sleep in the park during the day and 'come out' for the dinner meal.

Interviewers always worked in pairs and generally worked a three-hour shift. The interview team offered candies and cigarettes to people perceived as homeless prior to asking the three screening questions. This approach ensured there is no incentive for homeless people to complete an interview more than once.

The screening questions helped ensure that only qualified homeless individuals took part in the interview. To qualify for inclusion in the day-time component, an individual:

- must not have been interviewed earlier that day;
- must be homeless according to the project's definition; and
- must not have stayed in a shelter, safe house or transition house the night before (where they would have been counted in the night-time component).

The day-time questionnaire gathered the same information as the night-time count forms plus two questions about the use of shelters. The one page questionnaire took a couple of minutes to complete.

Interviewers were also instructed to record the person's age and gender as best they can if people are perceived to be homeless but do not agree to participate in the study. These surveys are not included in the reported number of homeless people found on the day of the count, as these people may decide to participate later in the day, and would therefore be double counted, or they may not be homeless.

Approximately 800 volunteer interviewers, many from local service providers, conducted the day-time interviews. The vast majority of the volunteers attended one of the eight training sessions. Interviewers were instructed to avoid interviewing in the presence of media in order to preserve interviewee confidentiality.

Posters, similar to those used in the 2005 count, were provided to agencies in advance to notify people about the upcoming count and urge them to visit a pre-identified location to be enumerated. Service agencies also agreed to complete interviews with clients who were homeless, who came to them for service on count day. These two strategies were used to help identify some of the hidden homeless (mostly "couch surfers"), who would otherwise be missed during the count.

Staff at the Kitsilano shower program, which caters to people primarily living in Pacific Spirit Park, interviewed people at their program on the Saturday before the Count. People who use the Kits shower program do not frequent other services for the homeless. The homeless people at the shower program were instructed not to participate in another interview should someone with the identifying yellow badge approach them on Tuesday, March 11. The interviews completed at the shower program were included in the count data.

In addition, outreach workers and service agencies that frequently had contact with sofa surfers were asked to complete interviews with these individuals. To the extent that the method captured sofa surfers, they are included with the street/service homeless population.

After being reminded of the major characteristics of day time component of the MVHC, interview participants were asked if they have any concerns about the approach that is taken to conduct this aspect of the count, and if so, how might the day time component be improved.

Most respondents had some concerns and related suggestions for improving the day time component. One respondent noted that the existing approach is not so effective at enumerating the hidden homeless: "you tend to get the usual suspects. You find a lot of people who look homeless, but we miss people who are better at hiding the fact that they're homeless…Maybe we could do roving teams."

Another interviewee noted that she was concerned about what to do with people who appear homeless but refuse to participate in the interview: "The challenge is what to do with people who say no I don't want to do your survey." To address this challenge, this respondent indicated that "you need to get volunteers that are comfortable and it's not everybody that can do it. If there's one thing I'd like to look it it's making sure that the people we get out there are comfortable walking the streets that know how to speak the language and understand the body language, and can listen and run if necessary." One assessment participant offered similar comments and suggested "using outreach workers to the greatest extent possible. They have pre-existing relationships with homeless people and are best equipped to do the interview." Combined with comments about concerns of the abilities of the volunteers were concerns about the number of volunteers. For one respondent, there were not enough volunteers: "you need more people. You're going to miss a lot if you only have 2-4 people within a grid."

Another respondent expressed concern about the practice of not counting people who appeared to be homeless but did not want to participate in the survey. "If you see someone on the street in a sleeping bag you can make the assumption that person is homeless… My understanding is that we didn't enumerate people sleeping. That's a huge concern. We can make some assumptions."[6]

6. Such people were not counted to ensure there was no duplicate counting. People sleeping on the street may have been enumerated at another location.

One respondent also remarked that the volunteers should be equipped to help people who express a need for assistance: "One thing I'd like to think is that we have options when we're talking to people. If someone says I'm not well, then we can send them somewhere. Or, if someone says the reason they're on the street because they're not housed then we have somewhere we can send them." One interviewee from the North Shore provided the following example of how they would like to see homeless people supported during the Count: "We produced a little business card that had all the referral agencies where a person who was homeless could find services and we taped a quarter to the business card and handed them out along with the cigarettes and candy. It seemed like a great way to leave something they could hold on to. It worked out really well."
Finally, a few respondents noted that they had no concerns, while a couple of respondents indicated that they could not comment.

3.5. Governance

Similar teams of consultants were responsible for implementing all three counts, having submitted the successful response to a request for proposals issued by the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness (RSCH). The RSCH is a coalition of over forty groups including service providers, community-based organizations, business and all levels of government. The Social Planning and Research Council of BC (SPARC) was the lead organization contracted to implement the count in 2008. The consultants received advice on the planning and methodology from the Homeless Count Coordinating Committee (HCCC), which is a sub-committee of the RSCH. In addition, the Communications Working Group of the RSCH was responsible for communications regarding the count.

3.5.1. RSCH, HCCC, Subcommittees and the Project Team

Assessment participants were invited to respond to questions about the governance of the count. When asked if they feel the current governance of the count is a good approach, the majority of respondents agreed with the current governance model for the count and many had no suggestions for improving the governance model. In the words of one interviewee: "It seemed to work well last year." The structure was seen by these participants as appropriate, with one interviewee remarking that "it needs to be embedded within the RSCH," while another noted: "I think the working groups worked well."

However, there were many respondents who agreed with the existing governance model but also felt that it needs improvement, especially with regard to the role of the HCCC. As one interviewee remarked: "I think it's the right setup, there's some tweaking to be done as to what the role of the coordinating committee is." This same interviewee suggested: "Being clear about roles in the Terms of Reference for the HCCC, describing where they have a place and where they don't. Set clear rules about missing meetings, and that you can't change decisions if you weren't at the meeting. Clear rules on what the committee is and is not, some clear guidelines on where we have to trust consultants [to do their job] and what the key points of intersection are."

One respondent suggested: "It would be better to have just one committee functioning and expand the communications working group to include outside representatives that were particularly interested in the count. Streamline it a bit."

Another stated that the existing structure is a bit "complicated and could be more streamlined. Perhaps the project can be run straight through the RSCH but RSCH would have to be less involved in mechanics, details, implementation – instead setting expectations, milestones, etc. and letting consultants do the work without much [implementation oversight]." Also in this vein, one assessment participant suggested that "at points it seemed kind of committee heavy (coordinating committee and communications). I'm not sure it was 100 % clear where responsibilities lay. For SPARC, who was the master? Who's got the final say?" One interviewee commented: "[The MVHC needs] a single decision making body in power to make quick decisions if necessary, but is also representative of other groups that are interested in this project."

One respondent felt that the existing structure is good because it creates accountability, but that the project-by-committee structure risks marring the count in competing agendas: "I personally feel that anything like this needs to be 100% not agenda-driven. I'm not sure if it was or not, but if the consultant was to come in as a completely independent entity, be self-governed and feed back to the RSCH that might be a better approach."

A couple of interviewees had concerns related to communication, both between committees and the consultants, as well as how the results were communicated to the public at large. One interviewee noted that the communication between the consultants and the committee could be improved: "there isn't always communication back [from the consultants to the committee] around the actual cost, the actual number of hours. Knowing where hours go in terms of priority isn't as detailed as it could be which leads to some challenges." Another respondent was concerned about the lack of clarity about the timeline for reporting about the Aboriginal homeless population: "Last year, expectations around reporting weren't clear, which resulted in Aboriginal numbers not being ready for first release."

A response from another interviewee suggested that the HCCC and the Communications Working Group should not have any role in disseminating the results: "the team of consultants should be given total autonomy in how the report is released and communicated." In a similar vein, another interviewee suggested that the "GVRD [Metro Vancouver] might consider allocating the communications portion to SPARC as well. I believe they're (GVRD) in a conflict when releasing results. It's of benefit when releasing results to do so in a manner that is beneficial to municipal, provincial and federal governments. They have a harder time reporting negative results. Some distance between them and official communications for political reasons could be useful."

By contrast, one respondent suggested that "the RSCH should have a person who leads it [the Count], then contracts with researchers. Someone who has more of a hands-on day-to-day management of the project, making decisions about where priorities are. I also believe, increasingly, it needs more funding to be done properly."

One respondent remarked that while they felt the governance structure was useful, they had some concerns about the composition of the RSCH: "There are many knowledgeable people around that table but not many service providers sitting around it any more. Many bureaucrats sitting on the RSCH." The call to further diversify governing members for the count extended to people with direct experience living on the streets: "Maybe have somebody who's been on the street and can offer frontline knowledge to different planning groups and committees about what to look for, how to go about things, and give feedback. For lack of a better term, a consultant that can tell the committees certain things they're not going to get from somewhere else."

Another interviewee also felt that the overarching goals that guide the governance bodies and implementation of the MVHC need to be broadened to include activities that connect the data to planning and action: "[Make] it broader than just [counting homeless people and reporting results]. Couple it with next steps workshops with participating agencies. [This] would provide a multi-faceted approach to homelessness, bringing in frontline people to a brainstorming session and ask what are we going to do about homelessness? [The MVHC needs to be] a little more expressive about how we're addressing the issue."

3.5.2. Sub-Regional Homelessness Tables

Several sub-regional tables assisted in organizing and implementing the count in their region. Some sub-regional tables played primarily advisory roles and others played a coordinating role. Sub-regional tables usually have at least one person attending the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness.

Assessment participants were asked if they felt that the role of the sub-regional tables should stay the same or be changed in future counts. Several assessment participants noted that the diverse roles of the sub-regional tables are fine as is. One interviewee remarked that the sub-regional tables are instrumental to the success of the count: "sub-regional tables are probably most important since they know what's going on [in their regions]." One person also remarked that the sub-regional tables played an important role in including the outreach workers and frontline workers in the sub-regions, bringing their expertise into the count process. Another interviewee noted that the current roles of sub-regional tables are good: "it's not broken so don't fix it." Another interviewee noted that an important role that the sub-regional tables play is sharing information about the count: "I think it's important to have sub-regional tables to disseminate information to local communities."

For those who felt that the role of the regional tables could be changed in future counts, there was a consistent recognition among respondents that any proposed changes will need to take into consideration the respective capacities of each table. As one person noted: "it really depends on the resources of regional tables. Some of them have support staff, some don't. It depends on what they're able to do." Another respondent recommended the development of different options for how the sub-regional tables can be involved in the count process. This respondent suggested that the development of these options should be done in consultation with leaders of sub-regional tables and take place early in the planning for the next count.

Several respondents had strong opinions that the RSCH, HCCC, working groups and project team should work with the regional tables to develop "a more consistent role for the regional tables." One respondent noted that the sub-regional tables should have a stronger and more clearly defined relationship with the Communications Working Group of the RSCH. In the words of one: "there needs to be some feedback to the Communications Working Group for seamless information flow." Another interviewee felt: "it would be nice to have more involvement by those sub-regional coordinators on the HCCC." Part of a more consistent role would involve increased participation of the sub-regional tables in the work of the HCCC: "Although the tables do have representation, that representation could be a municipal worker like a social planner that really isn't connected to the front line."

One participant encouraged sub-regional tables to also diversify their membership: "I'd like to see people there who are living on the street or have broken free from that. Mostly I see Executive Directors at the table and their people. We need to look more to individuals we're serving - it's…a resource that brings information we don't have." This idea was echoed by another interviewee: "Representation from more frontline and outreach workers would be great."

3.6. Volunteer Recruitment and Communication

In the 2005 count, the project team and HCCC used a targeted volunteer recruitment strategy that was aimed at people knowledgeable about the homeless and did not use media to recruit from the general public. The 2005 volunteer recruitment process resulted in 300 volunteers. By contrast, in 2008, the volunteer recruitment process used media to recruit from the general public in addition to a targeted approach, resulting in 800 volunteers.

In 2008, volunteers were recruited in a number of ways, through groups such as:

- sub-regional homelessness planning tables;
- Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness;
- local service providers, faith groups, labour organizations, and health region staff.

In addition, the HCCC Communication Subcommittee sent out press releases to local media and recruitment notices to an extensive list of service providers and organizations. Social service agencies forwarded the recruitment notices through e-mail distribution lists. In addition, many of the local papers carried stories on the count and the need for volunteers.

The volunteer recruitment form asked volunteers where and when they preferred to volunteer. The initial plan was to assign as many shifts as possible prior to the training sessions, but with twice as many volunteers as anticipated (including many who had not registered properly), many shifts were assigned after the trainings.

3.6.1. Public Recruitment and Targeted Recruitment

Assessment participants were asked if they feel that a public process should be used in future counts or should the recruitment of volunteers be limited to targeted recruitment. In tandem to this question, interviewees were also asked what could improve the volunteer recruitment process.
A small majority felt that, in addition to targeted recruitment, the general public should be invited to contribute to the homeless count project. The most common reason for agreeing with the public recruitment strategy is that it was perceived to raise awareness of the issue of homelessness in the region. One interviewee stated: "I think the public call was…very useful. Half the attention the count got was because of public support by people volunteering." Another interviewee expressed very strong support for volunteer recruitment from the general public: "Absolutely it should be broadened to the community. One of our main goals is raising awareness…A lot of volunteers in the count have connected to service providers and continue to volunteer…Ultimately, that's what we'd like to see, is that continued involvement, either volunteering time or donations, or policy changes. There's been much larger involvement in public education and advocacy [in our community] as a result of public involvement in the homeless count."

Another respondent felt that the use of media and engagement of the general public had a very positive impact: "It brought home to our community the plight of homelessness. There's the perception it's not a major problem and yet about 120 people came out to help with the count. It allows us to engage the community and to have them share in the responsibility." Another respondent recommended expanding the public recruitment strategy to target corporations with community engagement policies. Specifically, this respondent noted that "Price Waterhouse Coopers, BC Hydro and other large firms often offer their employees opportunities to volunteer. Should try to use that approach."

Some people who felt that engaging the public in the count process should be complemented with a better volunteer management strategy and volunteer manager: "I think it should be public but there needs to be a better volunteer management strategy, a more inclusive and unified strategy." In a similar vein, one respondent noted that establishing a volunteer manager position for the count may also go some way to addressing the challenges involved with engaging the general public. What is needed is "more resources to handle the response and make sure that people get call backs and don't fall through the cracks." Again, another interviewee noted that the count needs a "consultant with volunteer management experience."

Another interviewee expressed a different perspective: "leave it up to the coordinator in each region or sub-region to do recruitment. In our particular case we just had the one training session, but I had people coming to the training session that I'd never heard of before. I hadn't recruited them, they'd been recruited through media and just contacted the project coordinator, but I didn't have work for them. I had coordinated volunteers based on the enumeration plan that we had developed."

Another interviewee felt there should be greater involvement of homeless people in administering the survey: "certain individuals don't go into shelters [and are not counted]. That's why I'm a believer in using street people in the count - they know where to go. Some individuals don't want to be counted and we should respect that. But if [a homeless person] is familiar with certain places, they can go and ask the people there if they want to come out and talk to us. But if I go in there as a do-gooder, they're going to tell me to [get lost]."

The question about volunteer recruitment is tied to the overarching goals of the count noted some interviewees. One respondent summarized it this way:

> "We're going to need to have a real conversation about this with RSCH. In one sense it's a research project…To this end we should focus on a targeted recruitment strategy that involves experienced outreach workers, people who know what they're doing. That being said there's an important

> community/public engagement portion of the count…If it's about public engagement, there are some resource issues. We haven't put enough emphasis on how much this is a volunteer coordination project. [We spend] lots of time on data collection and analysis work, but not enough on volunteers, we need more resources there. This question has to be answered before we can decide about recruitment strategies."

For some respondents, targeted recruitment is the best approach. One respondent felt that a public call for volunteers should not be issued unless the count team is not able to fill the requisite volunteer positions to complete the count. In the words of one interviewee: "If possible, preference should be from organizations/groups that are familiar with working with homeless people. But the priority should be on having enough volunteers to do an accurate count, so volunteers should be recruited from the general public if necessary." Another respondent suggested that we need to "get people who are tried and true out there, not people who are out there for political/monetary reasons or what have you." From the perspective of another respondent, "it should be targeted, because unless you've had interactions with homeless people then the first challenge you run into is who's homeless and who's not. I would tend to say targeted because it gives you a better knowledge base." With a view to recruiting a diverse volunteer base, especially one that has more representatives of the Aboriginal community, one interviewee stated that the count needs "more connections with Aboriginal service agencies [so they can be] leaders of counts in their areas."

Another interviewee felt there were comparatively higher risks and less cost benefit when involving the general public: "I think having well-intentioned volunteers from the general population is needlessly expensive. With the amount of orientation/training/risk management, the cost benefit is not there. The targeted recruitment also requires training and risk management, but to a lesser extent." Another respondent emphasized the importance of effective targeted recruitment by encouraging the use of a screening process to ensure that the "right people" are selected and trained.

3.7. Volunteer Training

Eight volunteer training sessions covering the logistics of the count, the questionnaire, safety guidelines, and how to interact with homeless people were conducted during the week prior to the 2008 count. Although role-playing exercises were designed to be part of training, the large volume of participants made it impossible. In some cases, volunteers were provided with their count questionnaire and materials at the training sessions, while others picked up materials at a central location on the day of the count. Central drop-off locations were identified in each region by the local coordinators.

While volunteers were supposed to contact the SPARC administrative assistant to register and sign up for a training session, this did not always happen. Some of the information that was circulated by groups other than the research team was not always accurate, and notices were being sent out just a few days before the count saying volunteers were needed when they were not. This resulted in volunteers showing up for training sessions for which they did not sign up, which led to much larger numbers of volunteers for some of the volunteer sessions and, in a few cases, a shortage of volunteer packages.

The five assessment participants who served as volunteer interviewers on count day were asked a series of questions about their experiences with the volunteer training component of the MVHC. All five interviewees said they registered for the training and there were no concerns regarding the registration process. One interviewee noted that "it was easy to use." All of the respondents also indicated that they received their assignments and all but one received their materials at the training session as well.

When assessment participants were asked about how well the training prepared them to fulfill their role as a volunteer interviewer on count day, most respondents stated that the training adequately prepared them. In the words of one respondent: "Yes, I had clear expectations of what we were up against on the day of the event, of what to expect." Another respondent noted: "I thought the training session was really well done." In particular, this interviewee felt that "the instruction about tone and posture when approaching a homeless person was really helpful."

However, many respondents had concerns about the training and provided suggestions for how to improve the training in the future. One respondent had mixed reviews about the training, expressing concerns about the portion of the training that was handled by SPARC. This respondent stated: "The part with Judy Graves was done very well; the rest of it wasn't good." Another interviewee had concerns about the excessive number of volunteers at the training, as well as the lack of materials and overall sense of disorganization at the training. "Having enough materials and staff is key.... These things happen, you can't anticipate turnout, but given that we were advertising, it didn't work out very well and didn't come off very professionally."

Another interviewee had concerns about the standardized format of the training, indicating that it did not work so well for some volunteers, especially those who have experience working with the homeless population. "There was a lot of questioning around the training, outreach workers and people who work in the field were required to attend the training session, but [no] new information was being provided." This respondent suggested that the training needs to respect the time of volunteers who are already good at working with the homeless population. To acknowledge the existing abilities of some volunteer interviewers, this respondent suggested that the training should consist of two offerings: the existing format for new volunteers and a shorter "mini-tailored training session" for outreach workers that would introduce the questionnaire and provide the assignment.

Another interviewee recommended making better use of the outreach workers by training them to deliver the training sessions in their locale. This interviewee suggested that a train-the-trainer model should be developed so the knowledge of outreach workers can be used and the number of available training sessions for volunteers increased. A second point was raised by this respondent regarding the standardized format of the training, suggesting that the training did not work so well in her jurisdiction. "We struggled with the ‘made-in-Vancouver’ training sessions and assignments that didn’t work as well outside Vancouver.” This same interviewee remarked that her team tried to modify the training to fit regional peculiarities but the count project team did not accommodate the request to change the training. These comments suggest that future training sessions should be flexible enough to include some instruction about contextual factors particular to a given jurisdiction.

One respondent also recommended that training sessions should be offered to groups/committees that will be recruiting and working with volunteers on count day. This interviewee shared her story about having support from local organizational leaders and how she was not certain they were best used on count day: “We had the committee and there were key people from on-the-ground organizations that were a huge part of the day and I’m not entirely sure those people received enough information or training as to how their role could be or how they could really be successful in their role. They took the information we gave them and they did their best to get their volunteers out there and get the forms filled out and back to us. If we could broaden our capacity a bit and get a couple of strategic training sessions for leaders.”

Another interviewee suggested that the training needs to be modified so different learning styles are accommodated at the training sessions: “Individuals have different learning curves…Should be able to present it to a grade 8 class, but in way that someone with their masters degree…is also going to understand.” One respondent noted that the lecture style of the training limited the learning experience of the volunteers, suggesting that many people who do not learn well from lectures may not have acquired all of the basic competencies that they needed to perform their duties on count day.

Other respondents had suggestions for how to improve the training, especially for those volunteers that have never interacted with the homeless population. One respondent suggested that new volunteers with no experience with the homeless count should be given “significant attention to ensure sensitivity.”

To better equip new volunteers, one respondent encouraged the training to include role playing that reflects the types of interactions that might take place on count day. The idea of role playing was encouraged by another assessment participant as well. In her words, there should be more "role playing in the training and…longer time to discuss specific scenarios."

Finally, one respondent suggested that coordinating the volunteer training appeared to be very taxing upon the project team given the volume of volunteers. This respondent suggested that the management of the volunteer training should be a designated task for a person or sub-team within the larger count team. "It would be good to have someone with the specific role - to gather all the volunteers on one master list, distribute information and handle all the training sessions."

3.8. Count Day Volunteer Coordination and Logistics

The project team sought to make sure that at least one person in the two person team had attended a training session, and an effort was made to pair experienced volunteers with people who did not have previous experience with a count, or working with homeless people. Unfortunately, there was a disconnect between the most important (early morning) shifts and when the volunteers were available, and it proved very time consuming to find a slot for each volunteer that suited them and to ensure that all slots were filled. In the end, not all volunteers were placed, but most of them did get shifts. All of those who were willing to be flexible were able to get shifts. In some regions, a regional coordination centre was established on count day, which assisted the project team with on-the-ground coordination of count activities and the collection of completed surveys. Volunteers were sent a letter of appreciation. A formal evaluation of the count from the perspective of volunteers was not conducted.

Assessment participants who volunteered on count day were asked a series of questions about their experiences with the coordination of volunteers. All interviewees indicated that their boundaries were clearly explained, with one interviewee sharing that his team had to cover more than one area because one of the count groups dropped out at the last minute. Another respondent noted that she remembers being informed of the area that her team was responsible for covering but she wasn't given a map and expressed that she would have liked to know what parts of her area are potentially dangerous. She noted: "I'm still learning the area and wasn't sure what areas were dangerous or not. That could use some work."

When asked if they were able to cover their assigned area, all respondents replied in the affirmative, with one interviewee noting that he was able to cover his area twice. Another respondent indicated that his team was able to cover there area in part because they were familiar with congregating locales: "Because our assigned area was where we work, we knew where to go, like some non-traditional areas such as a railway tunnel and overgrown areas, and a vehicle where someone was living."

Participants were also asked if they had someone to call if they needed assistance. All interviewees noted that they had a number or set of numbers that they could call in case they needed support. In the case of one respondent, they used the contact information throughout the day: "Yes. We were back and forth with committee members all day."

All interviewees noted that they had enough materials, with one respondent having this to say: "Absolutely, we ended up with a couple of extra bags left over." All respondents also indicated that the process of returning completed surveys was clear and simple.

While most respondents did not have any suggestions for improving volunteer coordination, a couple of respondents had concerns and ideas for improving the coordination of volunteers on count day. One interviewee remarked that "the next count will need more logistical support. The structures were there but as far as human resources, more captains and more people in more individualized locations for people to hand in their forms is needed." Another interviewee was frustrated that some volunteers were not used during count day. She contended that people should not be turned away on count day, especially youth who have experience working with the homeless population. This respondent said: "Don't turn people away. Some outreach workers were unable to attend training and were refused as volunteers interviewers."

Another respondent "felt there were some communication breakdowns." This interviewee shared that she "didn't even know where to go for debriefing," suggesting that clearer communication about debriefing for volunteers would strengthen the count. One interviewee noted that there should be better supports in place for volunteers after the count. "What about volunteers who interview someone in their neighbourhood that they continue to see, now knows they are a…victim of violence? What should they do? Also, volunteers could become disturbed by what they hear, and need support. We shouldn't just leave them unsupported."

In a similar vein, another respondent suggested that there could have been more follow up with volunteers after the count. She suggested using a survey "to let volunteers share their experiences." This interviewee noted that such follow up could encourage people to "stay involved." Another suggested a newsletter to engage in follow up: "[For example,] a fact finding sheet to volunteers would be good." Finally, another said: "I think there should be greater recognition of the work of the volunteers."

3.9. MVHC Findings and Community Mobilization

This section presents an analysis of interviewee responses to question about the use of the findings from the 2008 homeless count and the role of the count in educating and mobilizing the public around homelessness.

3.9.1. Confidence in MVHC Findings

Assessment participants were first asked about the degree to which they are confident in using the results of the MVHC. Although several respondents noted that the results are limited because the MVHC is an undercount, a large majority of respondents indicated that they were confident using the results in their work. One respondent noted: "I feel very confident in the count findings for what they are…The most important thing is that it gives us a sense of the trend." Another respondent expressed that they were very confident in the findings for her area: "I feel very confident because I know how the process worked."

Another respondent indicated that the findings are trustworthy and largely accepted as an undercount, but still a reasonable measure of homelessness in Metro Vancouver: "it seems well-accepted." Again, another respondent said: "I guess I would say confident. I think every time this count happens there are always questions about methodology and an undercount. It's acknowledged that it's an undercount. It's out there as a good qualified measure." One interviewee remarked that "I feel that the count accurately reflects, what it says it reflects (# of people in the areas who completed survey), but not actual number of homeless people."

Many respondents noted that they understood and, in some cases, expressed concern about the fact that the MVHC does not enumerate all homeless people in Metro Vancouver. For instance, the homeless youth population was noted as inaccurately reported in the MVHC by this respondent: "Many youth service providers felt that the margin for youth error was significant. We had 800 requests for shelter and housing from youth in 2008. The count that night was 150. That's problematic for the credibility of the entire count." The concern about the findings for homeless youth also troubled another respondent, who stated: "I don't think it was representative of the youth population. That's problematic for me."

Other respondents suggested that they felt that the number of homeless reported in their area is much higher than what is reported in the count findings. One respondent noted: "We think based on our outreach program here that the number is probably double [what was reported in the MVHC]."

3.9.2. Use of Data for Planning

Interviewees were also asked if they have ever used the findings from the count or whether they know of any instances when the findings were used in community planning, policy making and/or service planning.

One respondent noted that the MVHC data has informed the work of the Homeless Income Assistance Outreach Program, the activities of HEAT, and was used by Street to Home Foundation in the development of their six year strategy on homelessness to support the City's Homeless Action Plan to 2015. Another respondent used the data to inform health authority officials engaged in program development work.

Some respondents also noted that the data is regularly used to advocate for social housing on multiple fronts:

> "We used it to advocate for city reforms around SROs, to promote the idea that the shelters are overloaded and there was inadequate shelter space. We used it at public hearings to advocate for increasing shelter space. We used the count to advocate around Olympic preparations, Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games (VANOC) homeless steering committee group. It was used by many different advocacy groups to say there wasn't enough social housing, enough emergency shelter space and that homelessness was increasing."

In a similar vein, another respondent reported using the data "in presentations to influence policy, inform politicians and unelected officials in all jurisdictions about the problem of homelessness."

The list of forums at which the data has been presented are too numerous to list, there are so many uses of the data that "I can't list them," reported one interviewee. "We've used them for program planning, budget planning, communications, etc. Almost every local table and regional steering committee uses them extensively."

The data is also used by faith based groups in their program planning: "We used the data to learn how we can appropriately respond with services. We're increasing women's, drug and alcohol and feeding services as well as looking at next steps to get people away from homelessness. It's helping us determine our next steps."

Finally, another respondent noted that they continually work with the data in partnership with the local social planning council. This respondent noted that "we have a relationship with the social planning committee in our community and we work with them to use the data to raise awareness about homelessness in our community. We regularly use the data in our own organizational planning."

3.9.3. Use of Data for Public Education

In addition to using the MVHC data for planning purposes, the majority of respondents had either used the data or knew someone who was using it for educational purposes. One interviewee stated that "we probably used it 20-30 times in a year in various presentations to decision-makers and community groups." Taken together, the types of audiences that interviewees noted are very diverse and include: Premier's Office, schools, health authorities, city councils, business associations, businesses, colleges and universities, as well as community-based organizations and political representatives.

One interview noted the following: "I have been presenting to community groups, resident associations, rotary, chamber, business community, people on the street, and other service providers. A big mix of folks." Another respondent noted a wide range of audiences for his presentations and reports: "I use the count findings in my role with business improvement initiatives. I have also presented to municipal groups and the UBC Medical School." Another respondent used the count data for public educational purposes at: "SFU classes, GeoTech conference, Calgary Homeless Conference, …as well as the Mayor's Action Team on Homelessness." Another representative used the data to "speak with the nursing students at Douglas College." Finally, one interviewee remarked that they use the data to make presentations to funders such as Street to Home Foundation and community policing groups.

This respondent noted that her public education efforts have had an impact in her community, where "the Police Chief once cited the numbers."

Many respondents remarked that they are continually using the findings to raise awareness about the homeless problem in Metro Vancouver. For one interviewee, "it's an ongoing thing. I do public forums and presentations on homelessness and always use the homeless count data. My first two slides are always about the increase between 2002, 2005, 2008 and characteristics of the homeless population." Another interviewee also noted that she uses the data regularly at forums on homelessness and affordable housing.
The data was also posted on the websites of a few respondents so people can access and download it. One respondent indicated that "we use it regularly on our Stop Homelessness website, which is an awareness-building campaign and links to Homeless Action Week." Another respondent remarked that the data is widely covered by many media outlets, including the Vancouver Sun, which provided "2-3 pages of reporting in 2005 and 2008."

For one interviewee, the data was essential to her efforts to convey the human face of homelessness: "I use the count to give a cross-section of the reality of what's happening and making people aware that these are human beings that have no voice, and we need to be their voice."

3.9.4. Use of Data for Secondary Analysis

The MVHC data is owned by the RSCH and is held by Metro Vancouver. Assessment participants were informed that the electronic data from the 2002, 2005, and 2008 homeless counts is available for secondary analysis upon request to the RSCH.

Although most respondents did not know of any instances when the data was used for secondary analysis, there were several respondents that did know of such use of the MVHC data. Data has been requested by the Fraser Health Authority for mental health and addiction statistics according to one respondent.

Another respondent suggested that the data was used in "Surrey when setting up the Surrey Homeless Fund." This same interviewee also noted that he is aware of several instances when local planners have requested the data to drill down on issues affecting their jurisdiction.

On one occasion, an interviewee noted that an academic had used the data to conduct secondary analysis related to the ethnicity question. Another respondent reported using the data "to look at race, gender, and disability in human rights complaints with regard to private security guards." This same respondent indicated that it would be helpful to publish the raw data on the internet to facilitate secondary analysis.

Finally, an assessment participant noted that she was aware of an instance when secondary analysis was conducted to try and demonstrate the degree to which the MVHC is an undercount. This respondent reported that: "Covenant House conducted a gap analysis about 2.5 years ago and used the count information as an example of how far off the numbers are. The 2005 numbers were used to point out the disparity."

3.9.5. Count Findings and the Goal of Raising Public Awareness

Over the past three counts, it is clear that the production of the count data and its dissemination raises public awareness regarding the problem of homelessness in Metro Vancouver. Respondents were asked if they felt that raising public awareness is a reasonable goal for the MVHC.

Every respondent except one agreed that raising public awareness is a reasonable goal for the MVHC. In the words of one respondent, "I would think it's the most important goal." Other interviewees echoed this sentiment by asserting that raising public awareness is "a major goal" and again with one respondent: "I think it's a great goal."

At the same time there were many people that felt it should not be the only goal, and among these respondents there were several different opinions about what other goals should guide the MVHC. For one respondent, the count should also aim to inform public policy on homelessness and program funding objectives. In a similar vein, another respondent suggested that the count should also seek to result in more public education about homelessness.

Although in agreement with the awareness raising goal of the MVHC, one interviewee expressed concern about the media focus on divergent opinions about the number of homeless people in MVHC after the results were released. She suggested that "we need more media involvement after the fact, based on the information we're giving them without [having them] grab up all the other opinions from individuals that don't do homeless counts but have their own ideas of how many people are out there. I really think we need to look at that."

Another respondent in agreement with the awareness raising goal mentioned that the count needs to be attached to an action strategy that people who are aware can act within. This respondent put the point in the following rhetorical terms: "What do you want people to do now that they're aware?"

From the perspective of another interviewee, the count needs to raise awareness but it should not stop there in its purpose. "The goal should be to create an advocacy tool to eliminate homelessness. The public is well aware of homelessness in the Lower Mainland. The count illustrates that homelessness is increasing and that current government policies are failing."

Despite strong support for the goal of public awareness from most respondents, there was one interviewee who felt strongly that the count should not be guided by such a goal. In his view: "I don't think it should be a goal. I think the goal should be to count people. Other people have the goal of raising awareness. It should not be a goal of the MVHC." This opinion leads this respondent to conclude that "communications strategy should not be built into the project budget - it should be done by the RSCH once the count is complete."

3.10. Pre-Count and Post-Count Communications

The RSCH and Metro Vancouver were responsible for reporting the results to the media. SPARC and other project consultants provided technical information to the spokespersons. A media strategy was prepared by the Communications Working Group, which included input from the RSCH and Metro Vancouver staff.

When asked whether they felt the pre-count communication in the media was adequate, a majority of assessment participants said yes. One interviewee asserted that the pre-count communications in the media were "excellent." Other interviewees noted that they felt the lead up to the count was very well covered by the media. One respondent suggested that the media communications should be simplified and "use more visual and less text so certain people can pick up on it more easily."

Interviewees were also asked if they felt the results of the count were communicated clearly and effectively, and if not, how could communicating about the results be improved. While the large majority of respondents felt the communications about results were overall clear and effective, a couple of respondents did not feel communication about results was effective and many interviewees had suggestions for how to ameliorate this aspect of the count.

Respondents who felt the results communication was clear and effective said: "the press conference was excellent. Good pick up." Another interviewee said: "I remember quite a bit of information coming out as it was available - [I] saw it in the papers."

Many of the suggested improvements for how the results are communicated were centered around a challenge inherent in the count. As one interviewee succinctly said: "the challenge is that media wants instantaneous results and you can't analyze the data instantly. There is a tension between meeting media needs and analyzing results."

For one interviewee, the time rush on communicating the results in 2008 and the implication of the rush on the scope of what is communicated to media and the accuracy of data analysis was a concern:

"We wanted to have a timely release for the press, so we rushed. In 2005, we could give the press the total number and additional key data; in 2008 we weren't able to do that. Maybe we could delay a bit and say a little more to media when we do communicate with them. Also, because of rushing there were some errors in the data analysis and the writing of the report that we've had to go back and fix and repost the report. We could not rush so much and make sure it's right before going to press."

Another respondent also noted a concern about having two waves of data release: "I would suggest that the purpose of preliminary data release be revisited. We couldn't figure out why the data would be released before all the shelter data were released. Why cut out things like number of Aboriginal peoples? We'd prefer a longer time be taken to prepare the data properly." Another respondent noted that the first press release should be delayed "so more numbers are available." By contrast, one respondent suggested that a greater rush should be placed on the release of the data: "the only thing I would bring up is having numbers available earlier. Really, that's what media was interested in."

One interviewee perceived a lack of and/or limited focus on why and how the count is conducted: "we could do better messaging about why we do the count, the way we do it, and acknowledging the undercount." Another interviewee wanted to see an even larger scope for the communications of the results by including comparisons between the MVHC and other counts done in different jurisdictions. This respondent wanted to see "some information about other jurisdictions that had done similar counts; how the results had been used, how people in the community used their count…Maybe there needs to be a link to other initiatives - giving it more context."

For one respondent, the communications regarding the results was perceived as unfair:

"It was a mistake to release embargoed copies to media and government, but not advocacy groups. The numbers in the preliminary report were lower, but they became the 'official ones.' Government had an opportunity to respond to the numbers and analyze them, respond to them and create their media argument, but NGOs weren't afforded the same opportunity."

The respondent went on to say:

> "Government had time to create very clear messages about how their programs were working; we weren't able to engage in communications with SPARC. It was secretive around NGOs, but open with government and media. If the intent was to have the document as an advocacy tool, that was the wrong way to communicate it. The NGOs should be seen as partners…At the very least, give NGOs same opportunity to respond as media and government."

Conversely, one respondent stated that how the count results are released should be tailored to the interests of the groups that are paying for the research: "The results of the count should be communicated to the people who paid for the count. I honestly think there should be a separate communications strategy on that."

> Finally, one interviewee felt that the communication of the results should be supplemented with a documentary that explains the MVHC and the problem of homeless in Metro Vancouver. He suggested that "the report is saturated with information, so it's easy to ignore. If you can offer up a backup video piece to go with the count report, it would help humanize it for politicians and the people we're doing it for, stakeholders and decision-makers. It's logistically difficult, but I think it might be of value."

In sum, there were many suggestions for improving how the count results were communicated, some of which were contradictory. The opposing views emerged around the length of time between data collection and data release and how the data should be communicated. While some wanted the count team to take more time to release the findings one respondent wanted a quicker release of the data. Again, while some wanted a clearer communication strategy that applied evenly to all stakeholders, one respondent wanted the release to be tailored first to those who are paying for the research.

3.11. Ethical Issues

The MVHC follows three basic ethical guidelines: (a) People perceived as homeless are not forced to wake up but are gently encouraged to awake to complete the survey. Interviewers move on when a person is not responding to the invitation to participate in the count; (b) All survey respondents must provide verbal consent and be informed that the information they provide will be treated autonomously and confidentially; (c) Media are not allowed to be present during interviews or take footage of the interview process.
An additional ethical issue inherent in the MVHC is remunerating survey participants for completing the survey.

3.11.1. Remuneration for Survey Participants

During the count, homeless people were offered a cigarette and piece of candy for their participation, mainly as a way to ease into and end the survey. Assessment participants were also informed that unlike in the MVCH, survey participants in the Toronto count are given a $5 voucher for completing the survey. Based on this information, assessment participants were asked about what they felt would be appropriate remuneration for interviewees in the MVHC.

Not a single interviewee suggested that people should not be offered something for their time and many people offered statements along the following line: "It is important to provide incentives to make people feel their information is valued." The majority of respondents felt that the current provision of a smoke and candy is appropriate. One interviewee put his view on the matter this way: "I think the way we do it is fine. I don't think it's too much of an imposition – It's once every 3 years." One interviewee recommended keeping the remuneration the same, suggesting that consistency across the years is important: "I think we keep it as what we've been doing." In the case of one interviewee, the existing arrangement for survey participants was appropriate because "the cigarette and candy were really good openers." Again, another participant stated: "I think the cigarettes and candy were appropriate." One interviewee "felt comfortable with using the cigarette and candy to connect with people. The candy and cigarette were immediately useful." The appropriateness of the cigarette and candy are summed up by another respondent this way: "cigarettes and candy are universal."

Several respondents felt that cigarettes in particular were very good for engaging homeless people in the survey process. "Many homeless people smoke and [cigarettes] are generally appreciated." Even respondents that indicated that they are not advocates of smoking suggested that "the cigarette and candy is good. I'm not an advocate of smoking, but I understand that on the street that's pretty valuable currency."

Conversely, several respondents did express concerns about giving cigarettes and candy for health reasons. In one interviewee's opinion: "There needs to be healthier alternatives to cigarettes and candy." One interviewee expressed her concern rhetorically: "Would it be good to get away from unhealthy things like cigarettes and candy? Probably."

Many respondents felt that survey participants should be paid in cash or a cash equivalent. "Perhaps cash or cash equivalents should be considered. Given that coordinators and users of the data are being paid, it's only appropriate that participants be paid."

One interviewee advocated for vouchers because of his past success in using vouchers in his interactions with homeless people: "I carry Subway coupons and Starbucks cards. That way it's tangible…a nice way to say thank you." However, there was one interviewee that expressed concern about the suitability of vouchers in all jurisdictions, stating that, "[for example,] a gift certificate to Tim Horton's would work in Vancouver, but would that work in Langley. [Sorting out a voucher system for the whole region] would have to be done ahead of time" so it can work for everyone.

One interviewee noted that there should be an honorarium for people who were formerly homeless and served as informants on count day regarding the locations of homeless people. This respondent suggested that this type of remuneration was undertaken in her community, where "the formerly homeless people who came out for the day to point out areas for interviews were given honoraria."

Other interviewees felt that survey participants should not be paid at all, in cash or in vouchers. In the words of one respondent: "We shouldn't be paying people…I went out once on a project and had money for an honorarium for participants and they didn't want it." In a similar vein, another interviewee noted that a "$5 voucher might be too much." Other respondents noted that giving money can get expensive and may become problematic because it might serve as an incentive to complete the survey more than once.

For several interviewees, remuneration for survey participants should consist of a range of options that could include previously noted items (i.e., candy, cigarette, voucher, etc.), as well as: "fruit"; "gift bags [that could include] toothbrush, socks and cigarettes"; the option to be taken out "for breakfast or a bite to eat"; and, "sandwiches, hot chocolate or coffee." However, another respondent also noted that food is already available at many of the places where homeless people congregate and therefore may not be the best remuneration.

3.11.2. Media Ban during Interview Process

As was previously noted, the media are not allowed to be present during an interview but television reporters have consistently asked if they could tape a volunteer approaching and interviewing a homeless person. The ban was instituted as a way to protect the privacy of homeless people. Interviewees were asked whether they feel that the media ban should remain in place or should it be lifted in whole or part.

The large majority of interviewees reported a preference for the media ban to remain in place. In the words of one respondent: "the media ban should absolutely remain in place." And, for another interviewee the ban is important because it protects the privacy of homeless people who complete the survey: "It's very important from an ethical perspective to maintain privacy of homeless people." Again, in a similar vein, "the ban helps us to protect the people out there."

One interviewee felt that the ban does not limit the ability of the media to report stories about homeless people: "If there's someone who really wants to follow someone and do an editorial or something like that, then it's up to them to set that relationship up or to interview someone on their own, away from the count. The media should be banned on count day."

However, several respondents felt that the media should be worked with to depict the problem of homelessness in Metro Vancouver. One respondent felt that the media could be directed to "some of the people who are further along the way of getting off the streets who could act as spokespersons to the media." A couple of respondents indicated that the count could accommodate some of the interests of media by creating mock interviewees for stock footage. For one interviewee, "in 2005 we did a mock interview where media could get stock footage. It was quite heavily taken up."

Several people felt that the ban could be lifted in part or in whole, especially under the condition that consent of the homeless person was given. One interviewee felt that the ban could be lifted for the "sake of public knowledge. It may be an idea to allow participation, with agreement and signed release by the [given homeless person]." From the perspective of another: "That's a decision that could be turned over to the survey participant. There doesn't have to be a formal ban…Homeless people have the ability to decide whether or not they'd like to be taped doing the survey."

3.11.3. Other Ethical Issues

One assessment participant raised the cost of conducting the count as an ethical concern: "Could the cost of conducting the survey be better spent providing services, including housing or subsidizing rent. It's a larger question that should be kept in mind - that we don't spend more time counting, cataloguing and surveying the homeless than we do actually trying to solve the problem of homelessness." Another interviewee said: "I wonder if it is ethical to continue reporting on numbers without researching services that will change it."

Another respondent noted that they did not entirely agree with the practice of waking up homeless people to conduct the survey: "I struggle when somebody's sleeping and they're shaken awake. If someone's asleep you should take a look, make a judgment call…and leave them alone."

3.12. Funding and Budgetary Issues

Respondents were informed that the Calgary and Toronto homeless counts included homeless populations staying in jail, hospital, detox centres or recovery houses who do not have a place to stay when they leave. Although the HCCC made some efforts to establish relationships with these agencies with a view to obtaining the necessary data, they were not included in the count ultimately. The budget for the 2008 Metro Vancouver count was not sufficient to do this. Assessment participants were asked if they felt these populations should be included in a future MVHCs.

The large majority of interviewees agreed that the aforementioned populations should be included in future MVHC. One respondent had this to say: "I think it's important. I think we're missing huge numbers of people that are homeless by missing hospitals, detox centers, etc." This same interviewee noted that this is possible if the planning commences well in advance of the count: "We need to start early and get health authority and corrections on board. This could be done by the HCCC before consultants are even hired."

However, a couple of respondents raised some concerns about including these populations. For one interviewee, "I can see a reason for not including these populations because they're not homeless at that point in time. It's important to take that into consideration." For another respondent: "I'm ambivalent. Not everyone out of prison is homeless, but it can happen. We can't assume it's not going to happen."

For another assessment participant, the idea of including populations from jails and hospitals was questionable: "I think that the persons in residential recovery program should be included. Getting into jails and hospitals would be very difficult."

Some respondents felt that the youth homeless population is largely missing from the count. For one interviewee, "youth are definitely missing." This same respondent encouraged involving schools and teachers in the process of enumerating homeless youth. "There's room in the schools to find out what's happening with youth."

Two respondents suggested that people that are in psych wards should be included in the count, including a conversation at the committee level about how such information would be acquired. Several respondents also noted that the hidden homeless are missing. However, for one interviewee, "that's a much bigger issue than can be addressed by the count. I'm not sure we can change that or that the return for investment will be worth it."

Although this interviewee could not think of any missing populations, she was interested in seeing the count focus some attention on "people who are nearly homeless... There are a lot of people who are one foot in homelessness at any given time who could wake up tomorrow and be homeless." How this could be done was not stated.

4. A Review of Two Other Canadian Homeless Counts: The City of Toronto and the City of Calgary

The Toronto and Calgary homeless counts are described and compared with the MVHC in Figure 1 along the dimensions considered in this assessment. Calgary and Toronto were selected as they are Canadian examples of large urban or metro area counts undertaken on a regular basis. Although the Toronto count has been conducted only twice, its original design benefited from a rigorous review of other approaches, including Chicago and New York City.

A recent review of count methods for the Alberta government concluded that the City of Toronto approach was…"the most compelling of all methodologies for enumerating and surveying the homeless population" largely because it is gathered in a sound policy context. The count provides information the City needs about the homeless, why they are homeless and what they need to move off the street. It uses the information to plan and fund programs. In addition, the Toronto approach to measuring the unsheltered homeless adheres to statistically sound research sampling methods.[7]

The three counts share a number of similarities but are also different in important respects. The definitions employed are similar but the range of sheltering facilities at which homeless people are enumerated differ. Most significantly both the Toronto and Calgary counts include hospital emergency departments or hospitals, police and prison service, while the Vancouver count does not, making comparison problematic. In addition, the Calgary count includes people staying in longer-term transitional housing facilities. This is not the case in Toronto or Vancouver, where transitional facilities are excluded.

7. JYC Creative Solutions Incorporated. Review of Methodologies for Counting the Homeless Population. (Alberta Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2008).

4.1. City of Toronto Homeless Count

The first Toronto homeless count took place on April 19, 2006 from 5:30 pm to 3:30 am the following day.[8] The homeless were found mostly in shelters and Violence Against Women shelters (75%) and 16% were estimated to be on the street. The remaining 8% were found in health care, treatment facilities and correctional institutions. Its purpose was fourfold: (a) a count; (b) demographic profile; (c) service use; (d) needs assessment. It covered outdoors and shelters, some transition houses, hospitals, treatment facilities, and all correctional facilities. In 2006, for the outdoor count, the city was divided into 422 possible study areas approximately two square kilometers each. 261 areas were surveyed (100% of central core areas plus all suburban areas with four or more pre-identified homeless people and a random selection of others) from 8:30 pm to midnight. It was predicated on stopping everyone, not just those people who look homeless. Decoys were positioned throughout the city and were used to: (a) measure whether survey teams stopped everyone; and, (b) measure whether study teams completed each area in the prescribed manner. They were used for quality assurance and to adjust for undercount. In 2006, 78% of decoys were discovered. Also, the Toronto count findings were adjusted for unsampled areas.

In 2006, labour included: 750 volunteers, 336 team leaders, 49 decoys, 18 city staff, 53 city staff in field offices, and 12 city staff in command centre. Volunteers received one hour of training done in 17 field offices, using video to ensure consistency. Interviewers were positioned in all shelters from 5:30-9:00pm. Hostel Services provided the total number staying in shelters on count night. There was an extensive safety plan involving Metro Police, Emergency Medical Services and Office of Emergency Management. The budget was $90,000 in 2006 for direct costs, which included $5 gift certificates for those who completed the survey, as well as honoraria for team leaders – the two largest expenses. This figure doesn't include city staff costs. The results of an evaluation that was completed by volunteers and team leaders showed that 85% had a very good or good experience, while 63% said that the organization of the count was good or very good.

8. City of Toronto Staff Report. 2006 Street Needs Assessment: Results and Key Findings. Also see: City of Toronto. Backgrounder: Street Needs Assessment. April 15, 2009.

The most recent count in Toronto occurred April 15, 2009. The results are not yet available. The budget in 2009 was $150,000 - an increase of $60,000 from the 2006 count.

4.2. City of Calgary Homeless Count

The City of Calgary has conducted a census or 'count' of homeless persons every two years since 1992 on a Wednesday in mid-May.[9] It is based on observation of homeless people. The purpose was to obtain a count and demographic profile of the homeless. From 1992 through 2006, the count included two components. The first was a survey of facilities and service agencies. Facilities include emergency shelters and transitional housing facilities (i.e., homeless shelters, women's shelters, supportive mental health or addictions facilities, etc.), where shelter is provided for people who do not have a permanent residence of their own. Service agencies include all hospital emergency departments, police and prison services, emergency social services, and Calgary Transit (whose staff survey remote bus routes and LRT stations). The second component was a street count conducted by teams of volunteers who canvassed specific geographic areas in the City where homeless people had been observed to reside.

For the 2008 count, the City determined it could no longer effectively conduct a street count because the extent of street homelessness has exceeded its ability to coordinate the work adequately and safely. The 2008 Calgary count and subsequent counts did not include a street count. Now, the street/service population is estimated using a probability model based on past count data and weather conditions. Research has shown that the proportion of the homeless population counted on the streets varies quite predictably according to the weather on the night of the count. More homeless people seek shelter when it rains or snows, regardless of temperature.

The table below compares the homeless counts in Metro Vancouver, Toronto and Calgary according to the major theme areas used for the MVHC assessment.

9. City of Calgary. Community and Neighbourhood Services. Social Research Unit. 2008. The Biennial Count of Homeless Persons in Calgary: Frequently Asked Questions http://www.calgary.ca/docgallery/bu/cns/homelessness/biennial_count_faq.pdf (accessed June 12, 2009). Also see: Sharon M. Stroick "Calgary's Biennial Count of Homeless Persons: 14 years and Counting," Canadian Review of Social Policy 58 (2006).

Figure 1: Comparisons of the Metro Vancouver, City of Toronto, and City of Calgary Homeless Count Methodologies

	Vancouver	Toronto	Calgary
1. Frequency and timing			
Time of year	March 11, 2008	April 15, 2009	May 14, 2008
Frequency	Every 3 yrs	Every 3 yrs	Every 2 yrs
# of counts	3	2	9
2. Geographic coverage	Metro Vancouver (formerly GVRD)	City of Toronto	Specific areas of Calgary where homeless known to reside
3. Method			
Purpose	Count, demographics, service use	Count, demographics, service use, needs	Count, demographics
Time period	Point in time - 24 hour	Point in time - One night 8:30pm to 3:30am	Point in time - One night from 6:00pm to 6:00am
Interview/ observation	Interview those perceived to be homeless	Interview all people – not just those perceived to be homeless	Observation
Sheltered homeless	Complete census of emergency shelters, transition houses and safe houses. Some done by volunteer interviewers, some by shelter staff, some by shelter clients.	2006 - Complete census of shelters, sample Violence Against Women shelters, hospitals and treatment centres, jails and detention centres. Volunteer interviewers at all locations.	Complete census of facilities and services, including emergency shelters, women's shelters, transitional housing (longer stays),[10] hospital emergency departments, police, prison, emergency social services and transit. Observation by staff, informed by client records in Management Information System (MIS).
Street homeless	100% census known locations.	2006- City divided into 422 study areas consisting of a group of city blocks. 261 study areas were surveyed. Included 100% census of central core and known areas, plus sample outside core.	Beginning in 2008, estimate of street homeless using probability model based on past count data (regression analysis) and weather.
4. Governance	Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness. Managed by Homeless Count	City of Toronto, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration. City staff managed and	City of Calgary, Community and Neighbourhood Services, Social Research Unit. City

10. Transitional housing provides short-term accommodation while assistance is obtained to address problems. Longer stays refer to two or more nights stay.

	Coordinating Committee (a subcommittee). Consultant hired to implement count.	staffed.	staff managed.
5. Volunteer recruitment and communication	Targeted and public recruitment	Targeted and public recruitment	No volunteers in 2008 and beyond.
6. Volunteer training	8 - 3 hour training sessions across Metro Vancouver, by registration.	1.5 hour training and orientation session, including a training video for consistency by registration.	n/a
7. Volunteer coordination and logistics	2008 - 800 volunteers, 11 area coordinators, 2 staff in main office. Some areas had a staffed field office.	2006 – 1200 people including 750 volunteers, 336 team leaders (experience with homeless people), 49 quality assurance decoys, 18 city staff on special teams, 53 City staff in 13 field offices for training, support, start and end points, and 12 city staff in command centre.	n/a
9. Pre and post count communication	Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness and Communications Working Group	City of Toronto	City of Calgary
10. Ethical issues	Candy/cigarette provided upon approach/conclusion	$5 voucher	Provided "giveaway packages" when street count was conducted
11. Funding and budget	2008 - $75,000. Funded by HPS, United Way and Vancouver Foundation. For consultant time to plan, manage and document and count expenses.	2006 – $90,000. Funded by SCPI. For project supplies, vouchers, ads, honoraria for team leaders. City staff time additional. 2009 - $150,000 funded by HPS.	Part of regular staff time of Social Research Unit, City of Calgary. Estimate 9 months FTE to design, implement and manage count.

Comparing the findings of the three counts suggests that the differences Cnoted in Figure 1 may affect the numbers counted. Firstly, the incidence of homelessness among the three urban areas ranges from .13% to .41% of total population. Metro Vancouver has the lowest incidence of homelessness of three counts. The street homeless comprise about 15% of the Toronto and Calgary homeless population as counted, but almost 60% in Vancouver. The relatively high share in Vancouver is likely a function of two variables: (a) lower sheltered homeless number due to missing facilities such as jails, emergency dept etc.; and, (b) milder climate. For the MVHC, this raises the question about whether a homeless person is more likely to choose to stay outside in Vancouver's more temperate winter climate?

Figure 2: A Comparison of the Findings of the Homeless Counts in Metro Vancouver, City of Toronto and City of Calgary

Findings	Metro Vancouver	City of Toronto	City of Calgary
#/ % street homeless	1,574 / 59% (2008)	818 / 16% (2006)	569 / 14% (2008)
Total homeless	2,660 (2008)	5,052 (2006)	4,060 (2008)
Population 2006 census	2,116,581	2,503,281	988,193
Homeless incidence of total population	.13%	.20%	.41%

5. Summary of Findings

Interviewees repeatedly commended the MVHC for its role in producing reliable and credible data about the homeless population in Metro Vancouver and raising public awareness about the problem of homelessness in the region. Overall, respondents viewed the data from the count as valuable for planning purposes. Many also view the count as an opportunity for community mobilization around homelessness. At the same time, respondents identified a number of changes that could possibly strengthen a future count. This section summarizes the key findings in each theme.

1. Frequency and timing

a. The majority of respondents indicated that conducting the count every three years is adequate, although some respondents felt the count should be held every two years.

b. The majority felt that March continues to be a good month to conduct the count although some felt it misses the transient homeless population and a few respondents feel there are substantively different homeless populations in the winter and summer.

2. Geographic coverage

a) Most interviewees felt the existing geographic scope of the MVHC is appropriate.

b) A few respondents suggested better coordination between the MVHC and the neighboring Fraser Valley and Victoria homeless counts.

c) It was suggested that any changes in coverage of specific areas from one year to the next should be systematically recorded.

3. Method

a. The twenty four hour point-in-time method was seen by most respondents to being appropriate to maintain valid comparisons between count years. However, respondents were concerned about the undercount from this approach and were concerned that youth, couch surfers, people in hospitals, detox centers and jails were missed.

b. The majority of respondents felt the length and content of the count survey was appropriate for a twenty four hour point-in-time census. Concern was raised about the validity of the responses to the self-reporting on health issues. A few respondents felt that people who display behaviors of homelessness but do not want to complete the survey should be reported in the count.

c. Several respondents noted that questions on citizenship and needs should be added.

4. Governance

a. Most respondents felt the existing governance of the count was good as the committee structure and consultant arrangement creates accountability among stakeholders. The sub-regional tables that played a coordinating role were also identified as a strength because they are closely connected to their communities.

b. At the same time, it was recognized that the process of implementing the count is complicated with many people trying to influence the direction of the count. Some respondents felt that the role of the Homeless Count Coordinating Committee needs to be more clearly defined.

c. The RSCH was seen by some to be lacking representation of service providers and people who are living on the street or have recently come off the street.

5. Volunteer recruitment and communication

a. Volunteer recruitment, training and coordination were perhaps the weakest component of the 2008 count based on the comments from the respondents. While most interviewees were pleased with the number of volunteers, some felt it was not appropriate to turn others away.

b. While most felt the public process of recruiting was beneficial, some expressed concern about the competencies of some of the new volunteers and felt that a more complete screening process would be needed if a public process was used again.

c. The recruitment process was perceived by many as effective overall as it helped raise public awareness about homelessness, and according to some respondents, contributed to increases in the number of volunteers working at social service agencies to address homelessness.

d. Some interviewees were concerned that homeless people were not targeted in the recruitment for volunteer interviewers.

6. Volunteer training

a. While all respondents felt that the registration process was simple for them, not all volunteers who showed up for training were registered. The excessive number of volunteers that came to some training sessions meant that organizers were overwhelmed and that there were insufficient packages for volunteers.

b. Some of the training was seen as redundant for people who already have experience working with the homeless population. Some respondents also felt the training sessions were not always sensitive to jurisdictional peculiarities, particularly in communities outside of Vancouver.

c. Some interviewees felt that there should be opportunities for role playing and practice interviews at the training sessions.

7. Count day volunteer coordination and logistics

a. Respondents overall felt that the coordination of volunteers on count day was effective and that instruction of what to do were clear for them.

b. Respondents however reported that there were too many volunteers and some could not be assigned. Some respondents felt it would be helpful for volunteers to have a map showing those areas that may be potentially dangerous or risky in their area. Some respondents suggested that volunteer interviewers should have a list of services that could help the homeless if asked.

c. Some respondents also felt that debriefing and follow-up with the volunteers was not sufficient, nor was there a volunteer appreciation event.

8. MVHC findings and community mobilization

a. Most interviewees are confident in the findings of the MVHC; however, respondents expressed concern about the fact that many homeless people are not included in the MVHC final results.

b. The findings are often used in planning and policy development as well as being frequently used for public education and presentations to a wide variety of groups.

c. There appeared to be general support for the count to be used as a community mobilization tool, but many cited concerns about under-resourcing the volunteer component of the MVHC. Others felt the RSCH needs to clarify whether having community mobilization as a primary purpose is appropriate.

9. Pre-count and post-count communications

a. The majority of interviewees suggested that media involvement is a strong quality of the MVHC and respondents reported that the communication before and after the count was clear and effective.

b. However, concern was raised about the rush to get preliminary findings to the media and the risk of errors. Respondents also suggested that it is important to remind the media that the results are an undercount of the number of people who are homeless.

c. A couple of respondents felt that the communications could be more accessible to a wider audience by including simple illustrations about the data or the 'human face' of homelessness.

10. Ethical issues

a. The majority of respondents felt that the ban on media taking footage of the count should be retained; however, a few respondents felt the decision should be left to the homeless person being interviewed.

b. All respondents felt that it would be unethical to not remunerate survey participants. The majority indicated that the current provision of cigarettes and candy is as an appropriate way to thank survey participants for their time and information. Some felt that a voucher to purchase goods at a local store or healthier choices beside cigarettes and candy would be more appropriate.

11. Funding and budgetary issues

a. The existing budget is perceived by many respondents to be inadequate especially with the increased demands for managing volunteer recruitment, training and coordination on count day.

b. The majority of respondents felt that additional funds would be required to include missing populations like homeless people in hospitals, jails, detox and recovery houses.

6. Recommendations

The recommendations featured below are informed by the interview data, the review of the Toronto and Calgary homeless counts, as well as the input from focus group participants. As was noted in the methodology section, the focus group session engaged members of the project team in dialogue and deliberation of the draft MVHC recommendations. Focus group participant input has been integrated into the final MVHC recommendations.

It is important to note that the nature of many of the recommendations is contingent on the response to the question about the overall purpose of the MVHC. Is the MVHC primarily a research project, a public awareness-raising and community mobilization initiative, or both? The answer to this question has serious implications for many elements of the MVHC and, as such, we strongly encourage the RSCH to first clearly articulate the overall primary and secondary purposes of the MVHC. In so doing, many of the choices about how to improve the MVHC will become clearer.

1. Frequency and timing

The frequency and timing of the MVHC are similar to the counts in Toronto and Calgary.

a) The MVHC should be conducted every three years until it is deemed by the RSCH that additional census type data on the homeless is no longer necessary.

b) Improving the quality of the existing MVHC spring count is of greater importance than designing and implementing a "one off summer homeless count." However, if the spring MVHC is adequately resourced, then a "one-off homeless count" in the summer should be considered to determine whether the summer population is significantly different than the winter homeless population.

2. Geographic coverage

The Metro Vancouver count is very broad, posing challenges for effective street counting; however, it should be maintained.

a) Collaboration on homeless counts should take place between Metro Vancouver, the Fraser Valley and Victoria.

b) A more systematic method should be developed to record the changes in the local areas where street homeless people are found/searched for each iteration of the count. This would enable comparison between counts.

3. Method

The MVHC method is comparable to those undertaken in Toronto and Calgary – a point in time study (e.g., over an evening or 24 hour period) with a focus on sheltered and street homeless. No other jurisdictions have undertaken a period prevalence count and these are usually restricted to jurisdictions with Management Information Systems (MIS) that can produce figures on the number of homeless over a period of time.

a) The point in time count approach is consistent with counts in other major metropolitan areas and should be maintained.

b) The public should be better educated about the differences between point-in-time and period counts.

c) Work with BC Housing and others should be undertaken to develop a MIS that records unique individuals and can produce period prevalence data. In the meantime, the 24-hour count figures could be annualized using a formula developed in the US.[11]

11. Burt and Wilkins, 2005.

d) Although there was some support for the idea of counting homeless people based on appearance, the MVHC should not adopt the practice of counting people who have not completed at least part of the survey, even if such people display homeless behavior. However, interviewers should record the number of people they found who appear homeless but did not participate in the interview either because they were sleeping or they refused. This number should be provided in the report.

e) MVHC had difficulties managing so many volunteers for the street portion of the count. Consideration should be given to adopting sampling procedures in outlying areas with a low density of homeless persons as in Toronto. This would help reduce the number of volunteers and organizational challenges associated with such a large geographic area. Calgary found it difficult to manage the count with a growing number of areas with homeless people and moved to an estimate of street homeless; however, the Calgary solution is not recommended for the MVHC.

f) The RSCH should develop partnerships with health authorities/hospitals, correctional institutes, detox centres, and recovery homes well in advance of the next count. Such partnerships may assist in gaining the participation of such groups during the next count so that homeless people staying with them on count day will be included.

g) There are two options to address the difficulty in enumerating all shelter clients. The first and most ideal is to use BC Housing's shelter database for shelter clients on count day. This hasn't been possible in the past but may be available for the next count. However, there may be fewer demographic variables available. The RSCH or HCCC should work with BC Housing in advance to develop a procedure to obtain similar information on the sheltered homeless in time for the next count. The second option is placing volunteer interviewers in all shelters, which will require more volunteers and more coordination, and thus will be more costly.

h) The length of the survey should remain unchanged with some minor content changes, such as the addition of a question on citizenship and a question on what homeless people need to stay housed. In turn, the questions on previous experience with shelters and ethnicity should be removed as they provide questionable results. Self reported health issues should be retained.

i) No action on hidden homelessness is recommended. Neither the MVHC nor any other Canadian count is designed to capture the hidden homeless other than at service locations. Alternate methods are appropriate for measuring hidden homeless (see *Results of the pilot study to estimate the size of the hidden homeless population in Metro Vancouver 2009*).[12] The 2008 MVHC found approximately 260 street homeless who said they stayed with a friend. This is only a small part of the 9,000 hidden homeless estimated by the 2009 study.

4. Governance

The governance of the MVHC is complex compared to counts undertaken in Toronto and Calgary. In those two cities, City staff takes the lead role in planning, managing and reporting on the count, with input from community agencies.

a) The elaborate committee structure could be streamlined and roles clarified. A single committee with responsibility for planning, managing, implementing and reporting on the count is recommended with one lead staff person with day-to-day responsibility.

b) In addition, a strategy for liaison between the RSCH, HCCC, and the consultants should be developed. The key areas of interaction

12. Margaret Eberle, Deborah Kraus, et al. *Results of the Pilot Study to Estimate the Size of the Hidden Homeless Population in Metro Vancouver* (HRSDC. 2009).

between the consultants and the HCCC should be described in greater detail in the contract for the MVHC.

c) A common and consistent role should be found for the regional tables in the implementation of the count. The RSCH should establish a mechanism to clarify the role and communication responsibilities between sub-regional planning tables and the RSCH and its committees.

d) The decision to have a homeless count should be made at least twelve months prior to count day to provide adequate lead time to implement the count. If a consultant is hired, the contract should be signed eight months prior to count day.

5. Volunteer recruitment and communication

Resolving the primary and secondary purpose of the counts is the critical first step that needs to be taken in determining the nature and scope of recruiting and communicating with volunteers.

a) If the goal of the count includes raising public awareness, then volunteer recruitment should include a public process and every area should use and/or develop sub-regional tables to assist in the management of volunteer recruitment and communication. In this case, a firm cut off date for volunteer recruitment should be identified and adhered to.

b) Volunteer recruitment should be targeted if the goal is primarily or strictly a research project. In either case, the number of volunteers that are accepted should be based on the number needed to complete the count.

c) Outreach workers are a central contributor to the count process and should be involved in the survey process as much as possible.

6. Volunteer training

Volunteer training will continue to be a central characteristic of the MVHC.

a) Persons with experience interacting with the homeless population (i.e., outreach workers, etc.) or who have had previous count training should be able to attend a brief training session on administering the survey. Consider two types of sessions: (a) full sessions for inexperienced volunteers or new volunteers that provide training on all relevant aspects of the volunteer count experience; and, (b) short sessions for experienced volunteers that mainly focus on administering the survey and related logistics. The training for experienced volunteers should be designed to ensure consistency in the implementation of the method and, in so doing, protect the integrity of the data.

b) Design future training sessions so they are flexible enough to include contextual factors particular to the local jurisdiction.

c) Develop a train-the-trainers session for sub-regional coordinators who can then train the volunteers in their sub-region.

d) Consider using technologies such as video conferencing or videos to deliver the repetitive aspects of the training in multiple locations. This will ensure consistency and reduce the need for staff resources. A master trainer can deliver the training and a facilitator should be present at each site to guide any learning activities, distribute packages and provide any instruction.

7. Count day volunteer coordination and logistics

A large public volunteer component presents management and other challenges. The MVHC is significantly under-resourced to manage count day support. Sub-regional tables could play a greater role in organizing and implementing the MVHC with overall guidance from the count team.

a) Develop a strategy for engaging sub-regional tables six months before the count. The strategy could include a capacity assessment of sub-regional tables. Where capacity is low or sub-regional tables do not exist, consider investing resources to build capacity of sub-regional tables for greater involvement in the count.

b) Articulate the structure and system for coordinating volunteers on count day, including descriptions of the roles of count team members, each sub-regional table and region-wide coordinating bodies.

c) Create staffed support centres in each sub-region, and perhaps several in the city of Vancouver. These would operate on count day to provide materials, volunteer support, answer questions, de-brief, etc. This would be a good role for sub-regional tables with templates developed by the count team.

d) Provide a template to sub-regional tables on ways that information about referral agencies can be distributed to homeless people during the MVHC. The template should ideally contain only one piece of contact information so as to simplify the referral process.

e) Develop a template for a volunteer appreciation event that could be hosted in the sub-regions. Alternatively, consider the development and electronic distribution of a follow up newsletter to volunteers with facts about the count and stories about volunteer experiences on count day.

8. MVHC findings and community mobilization

There are always doubts about the accuracy of a count due to the challenges associated with measuring this often hidden and transient population. The way that the information is provided also affects confidence in count findings. However, there are some steps that can be taken to promote confidence in count findings.

a) Explore options for validating count results such as measuring the rate of recapture later on count day.

b) Develop a policy on releasing the findings of the MVHC that ensures both government and civil society organizations are provided the findings at the same time.

c) Produce two reports of the MVHC findings. These should be released together, and with sufficient time to ensure accuracy. A technical research report and a public report that is short and includes illustrations would make the findings more accessible to a broader audience.

d) Prior to embarking on the next count, consider how count findings will be used and assess progress in achieving regional goals since the last count. Communicate with public in lead up to count.

e) If community mobilization is determined to be a goal of the count, consider how to integrate community involvement in RSCH activities following the count.

9. Pre-count and post-count communications

a) The communication strategy will need to be developed once the RSCH decides if the MVHC is primarily a research project, a public awareness-raising campaign or both.

b) Release all MVHC results at one press conference instead of having two results releases and two press conferences.

c) Develop creative ways of emphasizing that the results of the MVHC are an undercount.

d) The RSCH could consider developing a short documentary film that could accompany the count report. The film could report on the findings and supplement the data with stories of the lived experiences of homeless people. Ethical guidelines would need to be developed and followed if such an initiative were to be undertaken.

10. Ethical issues

a) The media ban should remain in place to protect the privacy of homeless people who participate in the MVHC.

b) Mock interviews that media can use as stock footage should be arranged as part of the count implementation.

11. Funding and budgetary issues

In comparison to the time and resources devoted to the Calgary and Toronto counts, it appears that the MVHC operates with far less resources.

a) Reassess the resources that are required to conduct the MVHC, especially given the amount of time that is required to coordinate the volunteer side of the count (especially if public volunteer recruitment is maintained), and in light of possible broadening of coverage to include homeless people staying in hospitals, recovery houses, etc.

b) The RSCH should examine the benefits and costs of providing a voucher to those who complete the count.

c) Given the prospect of increasing costs associated with conducting the MVHC, the RSCH should consider the possibility of pursuing corporate sponsorship for the MVHC.

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Appendix A: Interview Questionnaire

SPARC BC has been awarded a grant from the Homelessness Partnering Secretariat of HRSDC to conduct an assessment of the Metro Vancouver Homeless Count (hereafter referred to as the count). Part of the assessment process includes interviews with key stakeholders.

You have been selected to participate in this interview because of your involvement in and/or knowledge of the count in Metro Vancouver. We are interviewing people who were on the Homeless Count Coordinating Committee, users of count data, organizations who participated by permitting access to their clients, area coordinators and volunteer interviewers.

The interview will take approximately 30 minutes (20 minutes for volunteer interviewers). Your responses will be treated anonymously and confidentially.
The results of this interview will be used to inform recommendations for improving future counts.

In order to make sure your responses are reflected accurately in our findings, we would like to record this interview. Do we have your permission to record this interview? (If no, then state the interview will not be recorded and summary notes will be taken instead.)

NOTE for interviewer: The parenthetical information at the end of each section heading indicates what type of interviewee should reply to the given question. The acronyms mean the following: Homeless Count Coordinating Committee (HCCC), users of data (UD), participants (i.e., organizations who permitted access to population) (PT), area coordinators (AC), volunteer interviewer (VI).

1. General (all)

a. A homeless count was conducted in Metro Vancouver in 2002, 2005, and 2008. Were you involved in any of these? If so, in what capacity(ies)?

2. Frequency and Timing (HCCC, UD, PT, AC)

a. The count has been conducted every three years. Do you think this is the right amount of time between counts or do you feel the count should be held more or less frequently? (If more or less) How often should the count be held?

b. The count is generally implemented in the month of March as this is originally when cold wet weather shelters operated. Is March a good month for doing the count? If not, what month would be better and why?

3. Geographic Coverage (CCC, UD, PT, AC)

a. While the geographic scope of the count is Metro Vancouver, it was implemented in eighteen municipalities in Metro Vancouver based on pre-identified locations of homeless people and interest/availability of local stakeholders. Is this the appropriate geographic coverage for the count?

4. Method (HCCC, UD, PT, AC)

The count is divided into two major parts: (a) Count of homeless people in shelters during the night (shelter component); (b) Count of homeless people in outdoor congregating areas, meal programs or other services during the day (street component).

a. The shelter component relied on individual shelters, transition houses and safe houses to complete the survey with each of their residents on count night (although some had count volunteers for assistance). Some shelters were not able to do this, resulting in incomplete coverage and/or incomplete questionnaires. What do you think would lead to more complete information from all shelters, transition houses and safe houses?

b. The street component involved asking volunteers to visit all pre-identified locations in their assigned area and engage homeless people in the interview process. Do you have any concerns about this approach? Do you have any suggestions for ways in which the street component of the count can be improved?

c. The survey consisted of 14 questions (17 for daytime questionnaire). Several areas were addressed by the survey, including demographics (e.g., gender, age, source of income), homelessness (e.g., length of time homeless, reasons for homelessness,) and health (e.g., self-reported types of health issues and use of health services). Do you have any views on the content of the survey?

d. The Metro Vancouver count is implemented over a twenty four-hour period. As such, it measures the number of people homeless on one day. Is the twenty four-hour (1 day) period a good time frame for enumerating the homeless population? If not, what would be a better way to collect information about the homeless population in Metro Vancouver?

5. Governance (HCCC, UD, PT, AC)

The count is coordinated by a consultant hired by the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness (RSCH). In 2008, SPARC BC was awarded the contract to conduct the count. The Homeless Count Coordinating Committee (HCCC) and the Communications Working Group, sub-committees of the RSCH, guided SPARC BC and a group of sub-consultants (project team).

a. Do you feel this is a good approach to governing the count?

b. Do you have any suggestions for ways in which the governance of the count can be improved?

Several existing regional tables assisted in organizing and implementing the count in their region. Some regional tables played primarily advisory roles and others played a coordinating role. Regional tables usually have at least one person attending the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness.

c. Do you feel that the role of the regional tables should stay the same or be changed in any future counts? (Please elaborate)

6. Volunteer Recruitment and Communication (HCCC, UD, PT, AC, VI)

In the 2005 count, the project team and HCCC used a targeted volunteer recruitment strategy (aimed at people knowledgeable about the homeless) and did not use media to recruit from the general public. The 2005 volunteer recruitment process resulted in 300 volunteers. By contrast, in 2008, the volunteer recruitment process used media to recruit from the general public in addition to a targeted approach, resulting in 800 volunteers.

a. Do you feel that a public process should be used in future counts or should the recruitment of volunteers be limited to targeted recruitment? (Please elaborate.)

b. Do you have any suggestions for ways in which the recruitment of volunteers can be improved? (Please elaborate)

c. Did you receive clear and timely communications about your volunteer role (training session, partner, assigned time, assigned location)? (VI Only)

7. Volunteer Training (VI)

Eight volunteer training sessions were conducted during the week prior to the 2008 count covering the logistics of the count, the questionnaire, safety guidelines, and how to interact with homeless people. Count assignments and materials were also distributed at most of these sessions.

a. Did you participate in the 2008 volunteer training? If no, skip to Q8.

b. Did you register for a training session in advance? If so, was the registration process easy to use?

c. Did the training adequately prepare you for your role in the count?

d. Did you receive your assignment and package of materials at the training session?

e. Do you have any suggestions for ways in which the training sessions can be improved? (Please elaborate)

8. Count Day Volunteer Coordination (VI)

In some regions, a regional coordination centre was established on count day, which assisted the project team with on-the-ground coordination of count activities and the collection of completed surveys.

a. Were the boundaries of your assigned area clearly explained to you?

b. Were you able to cover your assigned area?

c. Did you have someone to call if you needed assistance?

d. Did you have an adequate supply of materials?

e. Were the procedures for returning the completed surveys clearly explained to you?

f. Do you have any suggestions for improving the coordination of volunteers on count day?

9. Community mobilization (CCC, UD, PT, AC)

This section on community mobilization asks about the use of the findings from the 2008 homeless count and the role of the count in educating and mobilizing the public around homelessness.

a. To what extent do you feel confident in the count findings?

b. Have you used the findings from the count or do you know of any instances when the findings were used in community planning, policy making and/or service planning? If so, how was it used?

c. Have you used or do you know of any instances when the findings were used for public education about homelessness? If so, how was it used?

d. The electronic data from the 2002, 2005, and 2008 homeless counts is available for secondary analysis upon request to the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness. Do you know of any instances where the data was used for secondary analysis?

e. The 2008 count increased public awareness of homelessness in the region. Is this a reasonable goal?

10. Communication (CCC, UD, PT, AC)

Communicating about the upcoming count and informing the public about the results is an important task.

a. Did you feel the pre-count communication in the media was adequate?

b. Do you feel the results of the count were communicated clearly and effectively?

c. Do you have any suggestions for improving communication about the count?

11. Ethical issues (all)

Survey participants in the Metro Vancouver count are offered a cigarette and piece of candy for their participation, mainly as a way to ease into and end the survey. In Toronto, participants are provided with a $5 voucher for participating. Paying participants is both an ethical and financial issue.

a. What do you feel would be appropriate remuneration for survey participants in the Metro count?

The media are not allowed to be present during an interview but television reporters have consistently asked if they could tape a volunteer approaching and interviewing a homeless person. The ban was instituted as a way to protect the privacy of homeless people.

b. Do you feel that the media ban should remain in place or should it be lifted in whole or part? (Elaborate)

c. Are there any other ethical issues you would like to raise?

12. Funding and budgetary issues (HCCC, UD, PT, AC)

a. The Calgary and Toronto homeless counts include homeless populations staying in jail, hospital, detox centres or recovery houses on count night who do not have a place to stay when they leave. The budget for the 2008 Metro Vancouver count was not sufficient to do this. Do you think these populations should be included in a future count?

b. Do you see any other populations that are missed by the count?

13. Open ended summary (all)

a. Do you have any other comments or suggestions about the Metro Vancouver homeless count?