Homeless deaths skyrocket in major Canadian cities

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Homelessness levels have risen so sharply in Toronto, Canada's largest city, that city officials have announced the creation of 400 new beds in shelters this winter. This move, which is entirely inadequate to deal with the spiraling crisis, came after Toronto reported a sharp increase in homeless deaths in the first nine months of 2017.

On any given night, 35,000 Canadians are homeless, including some 5,000 in Toronto and 4,000 in Vancouver. An activist with the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty told *CTV News* last month that meeting the demand for beds in Toronto would require making a thousand more available immediately.

At least 70 homeless people died in Toronto in the first nine months of 2017, an average of approximately 2 per week. The city's medical officer of health, Dr. Eileen de Villa, reported that 57 were men, or 81 per cent, while 13 were women. The median age of those who died was 48.

Cathy Crowe, a street nurse, educator and activist who has worked in the area of homelessness since 1988, said the data doesn't tell the whole story. A man decapitated by a train, another beaten to death in a bus shelter, others burned to death in a makeshift shelter or dead due to a drug overdose, women burned to death in a ravine or murdered on the streets--this is how Toronto's homeless have died. "These deaths are violent. They are never natural," Crowe told reporters.

The average house price in Toronto was $1.2 million in March 2017. There has not been a subsidized affordable housing program in Ontario since the New Democratic Party (NDP) provincial government stopped approving rent geared to income (RGI) units in the 1990s. The federal Liberal Chrétien government ended Canada's subsidized affordable housing program in 1993.

With 176,000 people on the subsidized housing waiting-list in Toronto, anyone currently homeless in Toronto will continue to be so and that means their chances of living out their natural life-span could be reduced by as much as 40 percent, according to a study by Dr. Stephen Hwang, director of the Centre for Urban Health Solutions at Toronto's St. Michael's Hospital.

Based on the most recent available data, at least seventy homeless people died in British Columbia in 2015, a 56 percent increase over 2014, reports *Megaphone Magazine*, a non-profit group that advocates for homeless and low-income people. That is the highest number on record going back to 2006 and compares with 45 homeless deaths in 2014 and 27 in 2013. These deaths pre-date the full-scale eruption of BC's deadly opioid crisis and the figures, from the BC Coroners Service, are likely underestimates. Even so, this equates to over one death a week. The Coroners Service deemed more than half of the homeless deaths were accidental or preventable, as compared to just 16.5 percent of those it reviewed among the general population.

The Coroners Service found the number one cause of homeless deaths in 2015 was poisoning by alcohol or drugs, for a total of 34, up from 13 in 2014, and the number two cause was natural disease. In BC, the homeless die on average between 40 and 49 years of age, compared with the average person who can expect to live 76.4 years. The findings also show a 114 percent increase in homeless deaths in the Fraser Valley region, up from 14 people in 2014 to 30 in 2015.

The Coroners Service statistics includes deaths of those who were considered "street homeless" and "sheltered homeless," but not those who were staying in temporary accommodations such as a hotel, a correctional institution or a residential treatment facility with no permanent home to which to return. Deaths that must be reported to the coroner include all non-natural deaths and sudden and unexpected deaths of those not under the care of a physician; homeless deaths that did not meet this criteria were not included.

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The average house in Vancouver now costs $1.6 million, forcing people to seek shelter in the outer suburbs and beyond. “If you were to go to the Wal-Mart parking lot in Abbotsford at 2 AM, you would see about 20 vehicles there and every single one would have one or two people sleeping inside,” said Jesse Wegenast, minister at Abbotsford Street Church. “We’ve definitely seen a demographic shift away from the stereotypical, street-entrenched homeless … and we’re seeing more and more single-parent families. We’re seeing more people coming out here from Metro Vancouver, coming out here thinking they’ll find something more affordable.”

The Metro Vancouver Homeless Count happens every three years and on March 8, 2017, volunteers counted 3,605 living rough over a 24-hour period. Based on this count, it was estimated that the homeless population had increased by 44 percent to over 4,000 people, with more youth, those under 18, and seniors, those 55 and older, living on the streets or in shelters than ever before. In Surrey, a young girl who aged out of foster care recently died in a tent.

Just 51 seniors were identified in the 2002 count, and 371 in 2014 out of an estimated homeless population of 2,777. In 2017 the count found 556 homeless seniors out of just fewer than 4,000.

The number of homeless who identified as First Nations people rose to 746 from 582, although they make up just 6 percent of BC’s population and just 3 percent of Vancouver’s.

The report said five people become homeless within Metro Vancouver every week and 80 percent of homeless people in the region have a chronic health issue, 49 percent have an addiction and 34 percent suffer from mental illness. The report said the need for systemic improvements to “effectively manage the crisis is urgent” and requires action from all levels of government, though it specifically called on the province to do more. It said the region’s homeless population has steadily increased over the past 15 years and 60,000 households are vulnerable to homelessness because they spend more than half their income on shelter.

More than 70 homeless camps operate in BC’s Lower Mainland. “Advocates point to a lack of affordable housing, as well as limited provision of harm reduction and shelter services in asserting that people experiencing homelessness in the Fraser region experience marginalization that makes them increasingly vulnerable,” the report states.

When David Eby was the Opposition BC NDP’s housing critic, the NDP tabled private member’s legislation calling for a poverty reduction plan six times. Before the 2017 election he said in an interview, “I think you’re going to see this election contested on who has the best housing plan as one of the key issues for Metro Vancouver.”

The NDP has been in power in BC since July, yet no new plans were made to shelter the homeless this winter. Instead, the new government has focused on boasting that its spending commitments will comply with the austerity financial framework laid down by the big business Liberals, who slashed public spending to the bone and handed out tax breaks to the super rich during their 16 years in power.

The death rate among the homeless population also underscores how thoroughly cynical and insincere the federal Liberals’ national housing strategy is. Rolled out amid much media fanfare in late November, the plan pledged to cut the homeless population in half over the next decade. Most of the funds included in the much-touted $40 billion “strategy” will come from existing programs or must be contributed from the provinces, whose financial resources are already stretched to breaking point due to austerity measures pursued by successive federal governments, including cuts to transfers for health care, education and welfare.

The housing strategy will also provide billions to private companies to build “affordable” housing, which is considered to be housing available at 80 percent of the local median rent price. With typical rent prices in Vancouver for an apartment standing at $2,000 per month, that means an “affordable” apartment would cost $1,600, well out of reach for many working class people.

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