



Volunteer

Victoria and homelessness

"The homeless members of the Ourplace family may have a very different existence than what we volunteers see within the Ourplace context. Gordon O'Connor of Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group gives us a darker picture." - ed.

What's wrong with this picture?

Two professionals meet at a street corner in downtown Victoria. They set their laptop cases down and begin to talk to each other. One of them leans against the wall of a building. Suddenly two police officers arrive and start yelling obscenities at them. They point out a no loitering sign in the window of a nearby restaurant and while one officer demands identification and issues trespassing tickets, the other confiscates their laptops as abandoned property and throws them in the trunk of a police cruiser.

Does that sound familiar? Of course not. This type of thing would never happen to people who look like consumers or property owners. If you read that paragraph again, replace "professionals" with "homeless people." It makes much more sense now.

Scenarios like this one are a common experience for people in Victoria's street community.

Social profiling in Victoria

Last fall over 100 members of Victoria's Street community were interviewed by the Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group (VIPIRG) about their experiences with law enforcement. The study found that social profiling by the Victoria Police is resulting in disproportionate ticketing and frequent harassment of people who have experienced homelessness in the past two years.

Ninety-one per cent of respondents had been approached by police at least once in the past year. Fifty two per cent reported having personal belongings such as photos, sleeping bags, money and identification cards seized. Sixty-five per cent perceived themselves as being treated unfairly or unequally by the police.

The study also found frequent violations of the B.C. Police Act Code. Seventy-eight per cent of respondents spoke of seeing police search and arrest without sufficient cause, 86 per cent reported witnessing incidents of unnecessary force, and 83 per cent witnessed police acting rude, uncivil, or using abusive language.

A criminal response to social issues

While there is no excuse for such blatant discrimination, it should be noted that police are being forced outside their scope of practice during these encounters. Most of the interactions reported between police and street-involved people were over non-criminal incidents such as loitering, trespassing, mental health issues or intoxication. Service agencies across the country insist that police are not adequately trained to handle these issues.

"The fact that police have become de facto 'first responders' in the mental health system has a number of implications," said the Canadian Mental Health Association. "Traditional policing, with its focus on the use of force, does not adequately prepare police to intervene with people with mental health issues."

Heather Hobbs, a community activist with Harms Reduction Victoria and Aids Vancouver Island, said, "Meeting human suffering with surveillance, harassment and punishment causes significant stress for people whose

only learned coping mechanism for stress may be their next hit." She went on to insist that, "Beating people down, literally and metaphorically, when they're living a life of social exclusion and neglect serves to further isolate, traumatize, and dehumanize the very people our community should be drawing closer."

Police departments across the country have echoed these concerns with demands for public investment in social services so that their officers can focus on the criminal activities that they were trained for.

Despite this consensus of opinion, the Victoria City council continues to use law enforcement as a primary tactic to manage its homelessness crisis.

City council's choice to police poverty

Victoria has more police per capita than any other Canadian city. In 2009 it had the highest per capita police budget of any city in B.C., and it is clear that the bylaws created by city council direct police to devote a significant portion of these resources to poverty-related issues.

Victoria city council spent years in court fighting to outlaw homeless people from sleeping in public parks. Having lost this expensive lawsuit (twice), their fallback position is to have armed police officers wake people up and force them to take their tents down at 7 a.m. each day.

Victoria's infamous "Chattel" bylaw instructs police to confiscate personal belongings placed on the ground in a public space. This has obvious consequences for street-involved people. Finally, last fall Council approved a motion prohibiting anyone from sitting on the grass in front of a popular outreach centre.

New City Councillor Lisa Helps believes that a shift in the city's priorities is in order. "Police argue that they are under-resourced, but the problem is that resources are being deployed in an inefficient way," says Helps. "If we took money out of the police budget and put it towards treatment for mental health, harm reduction and employment creation, we would watch the demand for policing go down."

When asked about social profiling in Victoria, Mayor Dean Fortin refused to comment.

Making Victoria safer for everyone

This tactic of policing poverty that even the police themselves identify as ineffective is a prime example of financial mismanagement. Officers spend disproportionate amounts of time patrolling areas frequented by the street community in order to hand out fines for non-criminal offences. Just the staffing costs alone are enormous. On top of this, service providers insist that criminalizing and harassing people who struggle with mental health and addiction issues amplifies problems associated with homelessness, and costs even more money for health care, prisons and other expensive social services.

The saying goes that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, but what if the cure being prescribed doesn't even work? The City of Victoria's decision to confront poverty with social profiling and violence is a costly mistake that is making B.C.'s capital city an unsafe place for people who live on the margins of our society. For more information visit www.vipirg.ca.

Gordon O'Connor is a community organizer on Coast Salish Territories (Victoria, BC) and a member of the VIPIRG coordination collective.



Volunteer Absences

A friendly reminder that we appreciate knowing when you are going to be away, particularly for an extended period of time. And if you haven't already let us know, please take a moment to do so. Much appreciated!

Contact Rodrigo at:

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Personal Belongings

Volunteers are reminded (and strongly encouraged) not to bring personal belongings and valuables with them when they come in for their volunteer shifts. Unfortunately, thefts do occur every now and then, and we are unable to guarantee that your personal items and valuables will be safe here. If you do need to safely secure any belongings, please visit the clothing room, where lockers are provided to volunteers.