

**Street Talk column July, 2006**  
**2006 Count of Homeless Persons**  
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*1003 words*

**Counting the Countless**

While many in Calgary's red-hot economy settle into their warm, cozy beds at night, thousands of others are left searching for somewhere to rest their heads. For a host of Calgarians, the evening is bittersweet, marking one more day survived on the streets and one more night without a place to call home.

Two years ago I took part in The City of Calgary's Biennial Count of Homeless Persons, a snapshot of the 'visible' homeless population in Calgary. This year, my colleague, Scott Clarke, had the same opportunity. Since 1992, The City has conducted a census or "count" of homeless persons to gain a deeper understanding of Calgary's social issues and to provide information used for ongoing research and planning activities.

The count includes two components – a survey of facilities and service agencies (including social service shelters, women's shelters, hospitals, police services, emergency social services and outreach and community service providers) and a street count, in which Scott participated.

So, on a mild May night, approximately 150 dedicated volunteers including representatives from the municipal and provincial governments, social service agencies, outreach programs, faith and business communities, set out to count those less fortunate, the homeless.

Meeting first for registration and orientation, volunteers are coordinated into teams of three or four and assigned one of over 50 zones across the city to enumerate homeless persons who do not have a place to stay that night. Volunteers are shown how to identify homeless persons, appropriate methods to approach the homeless and instruction on what to do when encountering people experiencing mental illness or those engaging in illegal activities. Armed with juice boxes, bananas and a variety of other "offerings", they set out to canvass various zones of the city frequented by its down-and-out.

What makes counting the homeless so difficult is the fact that the homeless aren't necessarily visible or easy to identify. There are many temporarily displaced or "couch surfing" (staying with friends or relatives), others that seek shelter in out-of-the-way places such as under bridges and overpasses, in parks or other heavily wooded areas or in vehicles or abandoned buildings. In addition, many may be staying outside the areas identified by The City.

Another major barrier to identifying the homeless is the fact that because of pride, distrust, mental illness or a variety of other reasons, some homeless people do not wish to be identified. Many refuse to discuss their situation as they don't want to risk being branded or labeled and feel they do not belong there.

In the eyes of many Calgarians, the average homeless person is the dirty, scruffy street person panhandling downtown. The truth of the matter is he or she may be a student attending university, a labourer working in construction, the person bagging groceries at the supermarket down the street or your child's new best friend at school.

As Scott expressed, “From the first person we spoke to, I immediately recognized that any preconceptions of Calgary’s homeless I had beforehand would be forever changed.”

One articulate young man told the volunteer team that he had come to Calgary with the promise of prosperity and riches but was now finding it difficult to get established. Although employed full-time, a lack of affordable housing or cheap rental units coupled with the inability to put together enough for damage deposit, utility costs and first months rent was keeping him on the street. “I figure I’ve got about three more months out here before I have enough to get my own place,” he said. “I just hope I can hang on that long and that there’s something available when I’m ready.”

This seemed to be a common theme throughout the night, not only for individuals, but for couples as well. Like the young couple that had just arrived from the east coast of Canada.

“This is not what we pictured happening when we got here; this wasn’t in our plans,” said one woman. “It’s impossible to find anywhere to stay in this town,” added her partner. “If we can’t find a place soon, we’ll have to quit our jobs and find a way out of Calgary.”

Many people Scott encountered had worrisome concerns beyond just affordable housing, however. Scott spoke with a gentleman searching for empty bottles in a garbage bin, crutches in hand. “I can’t seem to get rid of this hip problem,” he said, calmly sifting through the trash. “The hospital helps me out a bit with the pain every once in a while, but they won’t fix it and they won’t let me stay any longer than a couple of days,”

“I have to pick bottles because nobody wants to hire a cripple.”

Then, there was the gentleman in terrible need of medication. Scott’s team offered information on a variety of clinics and services he may be able to access. He informed them he had already tried and was not able to fill his prescription for the evening.

“I’m afraid if I go to sleep tonight, I might not wake up,” he said, sitting on a bench reading a book. “At the very least, I just hope I’m not too sick to go to work in the morning.”

“I guess I’ll just stay up all night, read my book and hope for the best.”

These are just a few of the hundreds of different stories out there. There are many others – the single mother who would rather take her and her children’s chances out on the street than stay in an abusive relationship or the man who is too embarrassed by his current situation to ask for assistance from friends or family.

While many in Calgary reap the rewards of a booming economy, thousands of others are falling further and further behind due to the high cost of living and lack of affordable housing and services. If this growing trend of disparity continues and we do not address these issues, Calgary will no longer be able to achieve the vibrancy I know we can all collectively make happen.

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