

**A PROFILE OF NANAIMO'S GROWING HOMELESS
POPULATION:
BASED ON THE JULY 2006 HOMELESS COUNT**

**CONDUCTED BY
THE WORKING GROUP ON HOMELESSNESS**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This document reports the findings of the census of the homeless population of Nanaimo, British Columbia, undertaken by the Working Group on Homelessness (WGH) during July 2006. Previous censuses in April and November of 2005 detected significant pattern shifts between those two counts. Now the group wished to see if and how the numbers would be different during the summer. Rumors and anecdotal reports were suggesting that a “summer influx” of homeless persons to Nanaimo had taken place; investigating that hypothesis provided another reason for the count.

METHOD

In carrying out this census of homeless persons in Nanaimo, the Working Group used a one-page questionnaire, revised from one used previously. The count was conducted largely between 10 pm and midnight, Thursday, July 13 on streets in the downtown core and in selected outlying neighbourhoods. Other forms were completed by staff of shelters and meal sites. As well, forms were available for completion by homeless persons themselves during the day at the Living Room.

THE SAMPLE

Total size

A total of 244 completed census forms were returned. Persons accompanying the primary respondent totaled 56, yielding a total of an even 300 homeless persons at the time of the count. Only 20 persons (9%) had been counted in either of the past censuses and another 28 (12%) were unsure. This suggests a large turnover in the homeless population, a trend continuing from the past counts. Of those 244 persons interviewed, 88 (41%) were interviewed at service facilities for the homeless (food sites, drop-in centre), 82 (38%) on the streets, and 47 (22%) at shelters.

Gender and age breakdowns

Among the interviewees, males outnumbered females 137 (56%) to 106 (44%). Ages of respondents ranged from 15 to 78 with a median of 39 (half older, half younger than that), and an average of 37.9. On average, male interviewees were older (40.1 years) than females (35.5).

Ethnic breakdown

Over two-thirds of respondents (160 persons or 68%) were Caucasian, 34 (14%) were First Nations, 30 (13%) were Metis, and 13 (5%) were of other ethnic backgrounds.

Time in Nanaimo

The length of time respondents had lived in Nanaimo ranged from a few days to 57 years, with an average of 12.7 years and a median of nine years. The reasons for coming to Nanaimo were quite varied, with no predominant pattern: seven mentioned work or a search for work, seven were visiting or just passing through, four came here on a family decision, and another four said, in effect, “the grass looked greener” here. The remainder came for a variety of reasons, none of which was cited more than twice.

Being alone or with others

Over three-quarters of respondents (183 persons) were alone, while 23% (56 persons) were accompanied by someone else. There’s a strong trend for males to be alone more often (83%) than females (69%).

BECOMING HOMELESS

Length of homelessness

Respondents had been homeless for periods ranging from a few days to 16 years, with a mean of 1.17 years and a median of six months. Almost two-thirds (144 or 65%) had been homeless less than a year, 78

(35%) over a year. Thirty persons (14%) had been homeless three years or longer. On average, females had been homeless for 16 months vs. 12 months for the males in the sample; First Nations and Metis respondents on average had been homeless twice as long as Caucasian ones.

Conditions leading to homelessness

Addition of one sort or another was the most common factor cited as the reason respondents became homeless (146 persons or 60%). Next most common were high rent (87 cases or 36%). Other homelessness was produced by running out of money, evictions, relationship break-ups, and losing jobs. Certain of the conditions were more prevalent among some sub-groups than others.

THE HOMELESS EXPERIENCE

Current housing situation

Somewhere between 30% and 49% are sleeping rough, about 25% are in shelters, about 20% are couch surfing, and the rest are in other kinds of arrangements.

Health conditions

Ninety-seven persons (40%) describe their physical health as good, 96 (another 40%) as fair, and 49 (20%) as poor. A smaller proportion (81 or 34%) describe their *mental* health as good, while 98 (41%) describe it as fair and 62 (26%) as poor.

Eating

Roughly one in eight respondents (32 persons or 13%) did not have a meal the day of the interview; another 10 (4%) had not yet eaten that day. Of those who did have a meal, the most common places it was obtained were the Salvation Army and the shelter where they were staying.

Getting money

Asked how they get their money, respondents produced a wide range of answers; 113 derived income from work, 107 listed some form of public assistance, 42 cited illegal activities, and 14 listed other sources. Many respondents identified two or more sources, and eleven persons said they don't get any money.

Barriers to getting a place

Respondents were asked what was their biggest barrier to getting a home of their own. *Financial factors* (no money, no job, too few affordable units, low Social Assistance benefits, etc.) were by far and away the number one issue. *Personal issues* (addiction, mental illness, pregnancy, dependents, need for accessible housing) came second. Problems in the *rental process* (bad record, lack of references, ID, credit, and lack of transportation) were cited many times. Others noted their own behaviour was a barrier. A few had dogs. A variety of other factors were listed.

COMPARISON AMONG THREE CENSUSES

A lengthy table displays the comparisons and contrasts among the data from the three censuses.

Total numbers

The staggering total of 300 homeless persons, as counted on this census, came as a surprise, considering it was twice the April 2005 count (149) and three times the November 2005 total (99). A couple factors can explain some of the increase: 1) The presence of the Living Room provided an opportunity to count the many couch surfers who frequent that service facility and were missed on prior counts; 2) Contrasted with the November count especially, this one was more comprehensive in that all the shelters and service facilities were covered. While some of the large increase can be attributed to these methodology differences, one is still left with the inescapable conclusion that Nanaimo's homelessness problem had grown over the November 2005-July 2006 period.

Seasonal fluctuations

With the more seasonable weather of the summer, it is not surprising to find more homeless persons, just as fewer were found in the cold weather last November. So, some of the growth in numbers can be attributed to weather. It was noted in the Introduction that this count was also testing the hypothesis about a “summer influx” of persons coming to Nanaimo. The data collected do not support this conjecture: very few respondents said they were visiting and only one person had been homeless for a longer period than he had been in Nanaimo.

Length of homelessness

The average length of residence in Nanaimo (8+ years on the April count and 10+ years on the November count) was found this time to be close to 13 years. Coupled with the large numbers who have been homeless under a year and the small percentage who said they had been counted on a previous census, this leads one to conclude that Nanaimo’s homeless population consists mostly of people who become homeless here, and who stay homeless for a short time. Furthermore, that population keeps turning over with new homeless persons replacing those who manage to exit that situation.

At the same time, however, there is a group of a few dozen persons who might be described as “chronically homeless” - living three or five or more years on the street. Thirty respondents in this July sample met the three-year criterion of being on the street. On several factors they were found to be significantly different than those homeless less than three years (non-chronic).

Consistent and changing patterns

The latest sample is older by a couple years on average, it contains relatively more Metis persons, and its members have been in Nanaimo even longer than the prior samples. Other demographic items, however, remain relatively consistent across the three counts, e.g.:

- gender-breakdown, roughly 55%-45% male-to-female
- males being older by 5 or so years
- the oldest group being heavily male
- roughly 2/3 being Caucasian
- females not being alone as often
- proportion not eating on census day (1 in 6 or 7)

While the earlier spring-to-fall comparison concluded that with the arrival of cold weather, the count of homeless persons had shrunk and the remaining population was comprised of more destitute persons, who were less able to find *some* place out of the cold. This summer sample is first of all greatly enlarged, but also shows signs of longer term homelessness. More of the current respondents point to addiction and financial factors behind their homelessness and more are sleeping rough. (One contrary positive trend were the more positive reports of health). While the overwhelming majority of Nanaimo’s homeless continue to be short-termers (under a year), the group referred to here as “chronically homeless” - three years or more, is growing.

INTRODUCTION

This document reports the findings of the census of the homeless population of Nanaimo, British Columbia, undertaken by the Working Group on Homelessness (WGH) during July 2006. The Working Group previously conducted such censuses in April and November of 2005, and detected significant pattern shifts between those two counts. Now the group wished to see if and how the numbers would be different during the summer. Rumors and anecdotal reports were suggesting that a “summer influx” of homeless persons to Nanaimo had taken place; investigating that hypothesis provided another reason for the count.

The census projects were embarked on with full understanding that counting a community’s homeless population is an inexact science: trying to locate and interview every person in a fluid population whose members do not always want to be identified is no small challenge. Consequently, there is no claim that the count is 100% complete. That standard caveat still applied on this third count; however, a significant difference now was the presence of the Living Room, a day drop-in centre for people on the street. It turned out that many homeless persons who are couch-surfing (staying temporarily with friends or family) spend time at the Living Room and were thus counted there during this census. Those persons were largely missed on the previous censuses. It is assumed many couch surfers were still not counted this July.

This count is a point-in-time count, meaning it’s a snap shot for the day of July 13. Similarly, it’s a count of those who were visible to our census volunteers: anyone in a private home or a very hidden place were not available to not counted.

METHOD

In carrying out this census of homeless persons in Nanaimo, the Working Group used a one-page questionnaire, revised again from one used previously. Key changes were: 1) A question about sleeping outside was replaced by a broader question asking about the person’s “*current housing situation.*” 2) Two new questions sought information from those visiting, as opposed to living in, Nanaimo. 3) A checklist of reasons for being homeless was available on the form for the interviewer. 4) Finally, questions about earning any money that day and receiving public assistance were combined into a broader question of “*How do you get your money?*”

The count was conducted largely between 10 pm and midnight, Thursday, July 13 on streets in the downtown core and in selected outlying neighbourhoods. The night-time interviewing was done by volunteers in two- or three-person groups, with each group having a designated geographic area to cover. Other forms were completed by staff of shelters and meal sites. As well, forms were available for completion by homeless persons themselves during the day at the Living Room. Without the benefit of an interviewer, a fair number of these respondents didn’t fill out the forms as completely as we wanted. Respondents’ cooperation was acknowledged by an honorarium composed of comfort and hygiene items.

Note: In this report, numbers of responses do not always add up to the total reported since some questions were not answered by everyone. Means (averages) are often used as are medians (where half the sample was below that number and half above) to convey an overall pattern. Differences between groups (e.g., length of homelessness for men vs. women) are reported chiefly when they are statistically significant as ascertained by standard tests. Some findings that fall just shy of the required significance level are referred to as “non-significant” or words to that effect.

THE SAMPLE

Total size

A total of 244 completed census forms were returned. Persons accompanying the primary respondent totaled 56. This yields a total of an even 300 homeless persons at the time of the count. Just a few items of information (age, gender, relationship to the primary respondent) were collected about those

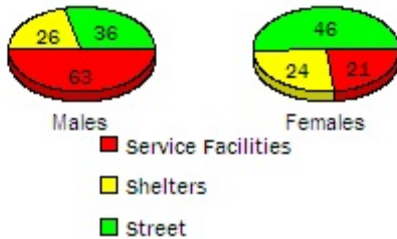
accompanying the primary respondent, so 244 is used throughout this report as the base in calculating percentages.

Asked whether they had been counted in either of the past censuses, only 20 persons (9%) said they had been, and another 28 (12%) were unsure. This suggests a large turnover in the homeless population, a trend continuing from the past counts.

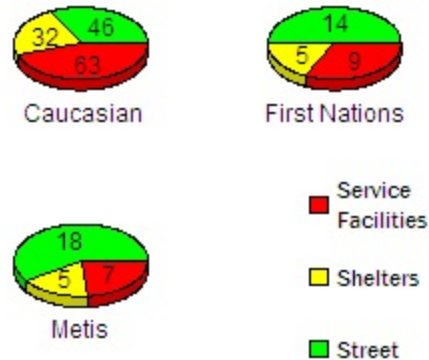
Interview locations

Of those 244 persons interviewed, 88 (41%) were interviewed at service facilities for the homeless (food sites, drop-in centre), 82 (38%) on the streets, and 47 (22%) at shelters. Other returned forms did not have that item of information recorded. Males were significantly more often interviewed at service facilities and significantly less often interviewed on the street, as shown in the left hand table below. Metis respondents were more likely found on the street than at the other two kinds of locations; the right hand table below illustrates that pattern.

Where Interviewed, by gender



Where interviewed, by ethnicity



Respondents interviewed at service facilities were, on average, 2.2 years older than counted on the streets or at shelters (40 years vs. 37.8 years).

Gender and age breakdowns

Among the interviewees, males outnumbered females 137 (56%) to 106 (44%). Ages of respondents ranged from 15 to 78 with a median of 39 (half older, half younger than that), and an average of 37.9.

On average, male interviewees were older (40.1 years) than females (35.5). Using 10-year age groupings, the data showed that females made up 58% of respondents in their 20's and 30's, while males comprised 69% of those over age 40. No separate analyses have been done of those under age 20 as they numbered only four. The table to the right shows the full age distribution for those counted.

Age Group	Number
Under 20	4
20 - 29	61
30 - 39	58
40 - 49	76
50 +	33

Age Distribution of Respondents

Ethnic breakdown

Over two-thirds of respondents (160 persons or 68%) were Caucasian, 34 (14%) were First Nations, 30 (13%) were Metis, and 13 (5%) were of other ethnic backgrounds. There was a non-significant trend for Caucasians to be somewhat older than other groups.

Time in Nanaimo

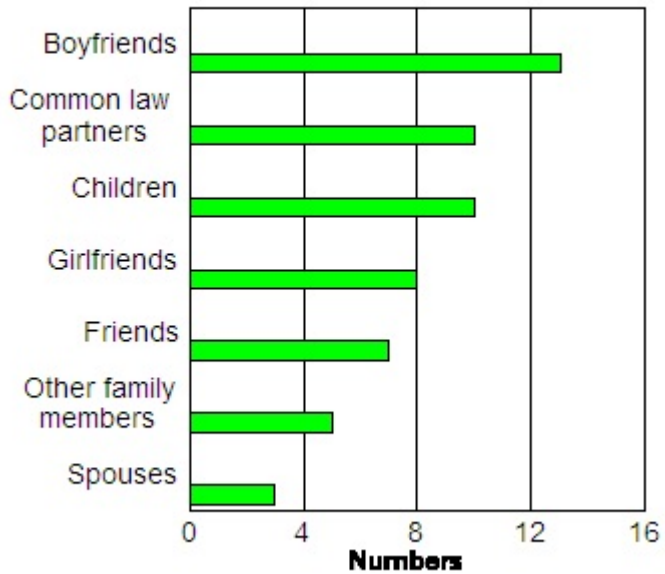
The length of time respondents had lived in Nanaimo ranged from a few days to 57 years, with an average of 12.7 years and a median of nine years. No relationship was seen between length of time here and gender or ethnicity.

The reasons for coming to Nanaimo were quite varied, with no predominant pattern: seven mentioned work or a search for work, seven were visiting or just passing through, four came here on a family decision, and another four said, in effect, “the grass looked greener” here. The remainder came for a variety of reasons, none of which was cited more than twice.

Being alone or with others

Over three-quarters of respondents (183 persons) were alone, while 23% (56 persons) were accompanied by someone else. There’s a strong trend for males to be alone more often (83%) than females (69%). The other persons accompanying the primary respondent are shown in the chart to the right.

Persons accompanying primary respondent



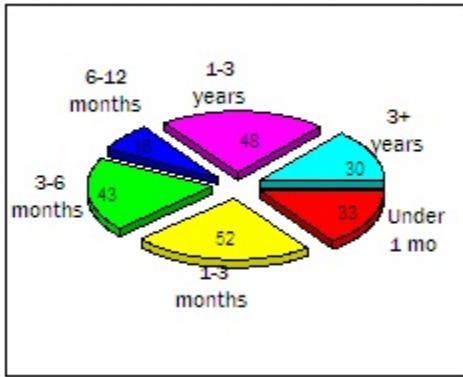
BECOMING HOMELESS

Length of homelessness

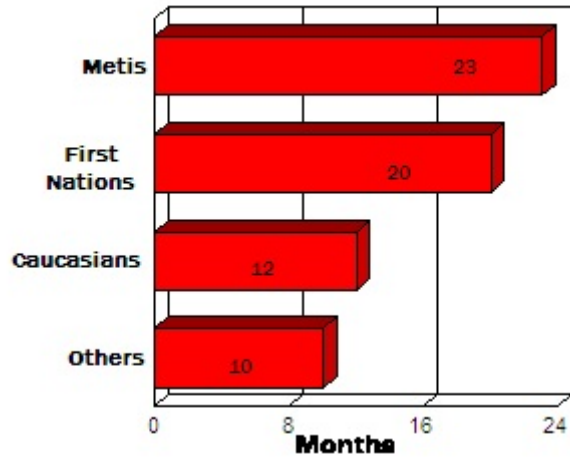
Respondents had been homeless for periods ranging from a few days to 16 years, with a mean of 1.17 years and a median of six months. Almost two-thirds (144 or 65%) had been homeless less than a year, 78 (35%) over a year. Thirty persons (14%) had been homeless three years or longer, and ten persons (5%), five years or more. The chart below on the left contains the full data.

On average, females had been homeless for 16 months vs. 12 months for the males in the sample. Length of homelessness varied by ethnic background, as displayed on the chart below on the right.

Length of homelessness



Average length of homelessness, by ethnicity



Conditions leading to homelessness

Addiction of one sort or another was the most common factor cited as the reason respondents became homeless (146 persons of 60%). Next most common (87 cases or 36%) was high rent. The table contains the full array of responses. The first part shows responses to the questionnaire's checklist; the second are the most common other conditions mentioned.

Checklist items

addictions	146	60%
hi rent	87	36
ran out of \$	79	32
evicted	77	32
relationship breakup	67	27
lost job	65	27
health	38	16
family conflict	37	16
injury	16	7

Other responses:

incarceration	11
conscious choice	6
other	28

Some of these situations or conditions that led to homelessness were significantly more prevalent among certain subgroups than others:

Conditions	More prevalent among	Less prevalent among
• addiction:	females: 67%	males: 55%
• addiction:	Caucasians: 68%	non-Caucasians: 53%
• high rent:	females: 43%	males: 30%
• high rent:	50 & older: 57%	under age 50: 33%
• evicted:	females: 40%	males: 26%
• relationship breakup:	50 & older: 46%	under age 50: 25%
• lost job:	40 & older: 39%	under age 40: 18%

THE HOMELESS EXPERIENCE

Current housing situation

As previously noted, the question on sleeping outside was rephrased to ask about one's "current housing situation." What that new question yielded was:

- At least 30% (69 persons) are sleeping rough, in a car or van, or in a tent. Another 34 (14%) simply said or wrote "homeless" without providing details, and 12 (5%) said basically "wherever." Many of these two groups are likely sleeping rough.
- About a quarter (23% or 54 persons) are in a shelter, and one divides time between being sheltered and on the street.
- Couch surfers, the group not learned about on prior censuses, numbered 46 (19%).
- A few (3 persons or 1%) are staying at crack houses, and 14 (6%) divide their time between the street and couch surfing.
- Finally, 7 (3%) identified yet other arrangements.

So, in summary: somewhere between 30% and 49% are sleeping rough, about 25% are in shelters, about 20% are couch surfing, and the rest are in other kinds of arrangements.

Looking at who are the couch surfers, we see that respondents over age 50 are far more likely to couch surf than younger respondents (39% to 14%), and that it's more common among First Nations (28%) than the other ethnic groups (14%).

Health conditions

Ninety-seven persons (40%) describe their physical health as good, 96 (another 40%) as fair, and 49 (20%) as poor. The proportion reporting good physical health declines through the four age groups while the proportion reporting poor physical health climbs. In addition, better physical health is reported by those who had eaten a meal the day of the interview; the adjacent tables contain the numbers on physical health conditions.

Age	Reported physical health condition		
	Good	Fair	Poor
20-29	53%	39%	8%
30-39	46%	35%	19%
40-49	33%	43%	24%
50+	22%	47%	31%

Self-reported physical health conditions, by age group

Had eaten	Reported physical health condition		
	Good	Fair	Poor
No	22%	56%	22%
Yes	44%	37%	20%

Self-reported physical health conditions, by eaten/not eaten

A smaller proportion (81 or 34%) describe their *mental* health as good, while 98 (41%) describe it as fair and 62 (26%) as poor. The non-Caucasian respondents overall reported better mental health than the Caucasian ones. As well, those reporting fair or poor mental health had been homeless twice as long as those reporting good mental health (1.46 years vs. .74 years).

Eating

Roughly one in eight respondents (32 persons or 13%) did not have a meal the day of the interview; another 10 (4%) had not yet eaten that day. Of those who did have a meal, the most common places it was obtained were the Salvation Army and the shelter where they were staying. Data are shown in the table below.

<u>Where had a meal</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>
Salvation Army	57	33
Shelter where staying	41	23
7-10 Club	23	13
Multiple places	10	6
Loaves & Fishes	2	1
Fast food place	15	9
Friend's place	9	5
Other	18	10

Getting money

Asked how they get their money, respondents produced a wide range of answers; they are grouped here as public assistance, from work, illegal activities, and other. Many respondents identified two or more sources, and eleven persons said they don't get any money.

<u>From work</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>Public assistance</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>Illegal activities</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>Other</u>	<u>No.</u>
Sex trade	54	Social assistance	68	Drug dealing	30	Friends	2
Employment	26	Disability	25	Crime	8	Family	1
Panhandling	14	Employment Ins.	14	Hustling	4	Other	11
Odd jobs	9						
Recycling	7						
Pension	3						

Some patterns emerged about what kinds of respondents get their money from what kinds of sources:

- 91% of those gaining income from the sex trade were women.
- 63% of those gaining income from drug dealing were men.
- 82% of those gaining income from other employment were men.
- The youngest group (aged 20-29) is especially heavily represented among those deriving income from illegal activities while the oldest group (50+) is least represented there.

Barriers to getting a place

Respondents were asked what was their biggest barrier to getting a home of their own. *Financial factors* (no money, no job, too few affordable units, low Social Assistance benefits, etc.) were by far and away the number one issue, being mentioned 184 times. *Personal issues* (addiction, mental illness, pregnancy, dependents, need for accessible housing) came second with 57 mentions. Problems in the *rental process* (bad record, lack of references, ID, credit, and lack of transportation) were cited 26 times. Nineteen persons noted their own behaviour was a barrier. Five had dogs. A variety of 40 other factors were listed. One person said there are no barriers!

Additional comments

Respondents were invited to make any other comments they wished. A total of 101 comments came from 78 different persons. A dozen persons said something about the need for affordable housing, a half dozen mentioned accessible housing, five called for more shelters, and six thanked someone or some facility serving the homeless population. No other issue was mentioned more than twice.

COMPARISON AMONG THREE CENSUSES

Demographic profile

Following is a systematic comparison of key findings from the three Working Group on Homelessness censuses. Where altered questions have made comparisons impossible, that is noted.

Points of comparison	Spring 2005	Fall 2005	Summer 2006
Total count	149	99	300
In all three censuses, males outnumbered females, with the margin very consistent	54%-46%	57%-43%	56%-44%
The proportion of the homeless population that's Caucasian (C) increased and then decreased over three censuses; the First Nation (FN) proportion has shrunk; the Metis (M) proportion shows steady growth	C: 68% FN: 25% M: 1% O: 5%	C: 73% FN: 14% M: 6% O: 7%	C: 68% FN: 14% M: 13% O: 5%
Age range was roughly similar	15 - 71 years	16 - 63 years	15 - 78 years
Average age was almost identical on first two and two years older on third count	35.6 years	35.5 years	37.9 years
Median age (½ above, ½ below) was almost identical on the first two counts, about three years older on the third	36	35.7	39
Males continue to be older, on average... males are less represented among the under 20 group... males are more represented among the over 50 group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (m) 38.3 to (f) 31.5 yrs • 6 of 8 under 20 were female • 15 of 16 over 50 were males 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (m) 37.6 to (f) 33.1 yrs • all 4 under 20 were female • 6 of 8 over 50 were males 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (m) 40.1 to (f) 35.5 yrs • too few <20 to compare • 23 of 32 over 50 were males

Points of comparison	Spring 2005	Fall 2005	Summer 2006
Average and median time in Nanaimo continue to increase across the three counts, while the range continues to be very wide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • few days to 58 years • 8.6 years on average • median of 3 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • few days to 45 years • 10.5 years on average • median of 6 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • few days to 57 years • 12.7 years on average • median of 9 years
<p>Most common reasons for being in Nanaimo looked similar on the first two censuses, but a different mix showed up on the third count</p> <p>Family decision</p> <p>Wanting to be closer to family</p> <p>Grass looked greener...</p> <p>Followed partner here</p> <p>For alcohol or drug treatment</p> <p>Work or search for work</p> <p>Born here</p> <p>Got stuck, ran out of money</p> <p>Family problems or conflict</p> <p>Visiting or passing through</p>	<p>16 cases</p> <p>12</p> <p>7</p> <p>6</p> <p>6</p> <p>7</p> <p>5</p> <p>4</p> <p>4</p> <p>-</p>	<p>23 cases</p> <p>8</p> <p>4</p> <p>6</p> <p>3</p> <p>7</p> <p>6</p> <p>2</p> <p>5</p> <p>-</p>	<p>4 case</p> <p>2</p> <p>4</p> <p>0</p> <p>0</p> <p>7</p> <p>0</p> <p>0</p> <p>0</p> <p>7</p>
The proportion of respondents who were alone rose considerably from spring to fall but then fell again	66% alone 34% not	86% alone, 14% not	77% alone, 23% not
Males were 10-19% more likely to be alone on all three counts	m: 72% f: 62%	m: 94% f: 75%	m: 83% f: 69%
The average time being homeless shows some fluctuation over the three counts, while the median showed increases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • few days to 19 years • average: 1.02 years • median: 3 months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • few days to 15 years • average: 1.42 years • median: 5 months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • few days to 16 years • average: 1.17 years • median: 6 months
The proportion homeless more than a year showed a big jump between the first and second census and has remained up; the proportion homeless 3+ years rose significantly from April to November and marginally in July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 86% < a year, 14% over a year • 3+ years: 8% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 64% < a year, 36% over a year • 3+ years: 12% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 65% < a year, 35% over a year • 3+ years: 14%
In the spring, females on average had been homeless more than twice as long as males; in the fall, that reversed itself; in the summer, the pattern switched back again to females being homeless longer	f: 18 months m: 8 months	f: 10 months m: 22 months	f: 16 months m: 12 months

Points of comparison	Spring 2005	Fall 2005	Summer 2006
The reasons cited for becoming homeless show large increases in addiction and financial problems:			(multiple responses allowed)
Addiction	30%	42%	60%
Family conflict	17%	15%	18%
Eviction	16%	14%	32%
Financial reasons, i.e., poverty	18%	28%	95%
Assorted other reasons	19%	1%	41%
Each of the first censuses found about a third of respondents sleeping outside; that percentage soared on the third census	32%	35%	51%
The fall census saw a sharp reduction in the number who rated their physical health as good (g) vs. fair (f) or poor (p); in the summer, the percentage of good rebounded	g: 40% f: 35% p: 25%	g: 29% f: 44% p: 27%	g: 40% f: 40% p: 20%
Likewise, reports of good mental health were down in the fall, but rebounded by the summer	g: 36% f: 32% p: 32%	g: 25% f: 50% p: 23% f-p: 2%	g: 34% f: 41% p: 26%
The proportion who didn't have a meal the day of the census remains at about one in six or seven	17%	16%	13%
Shelters (SH) and the Salvation Army (SA) continue to be the most likely places respondents had eaten	SA: 34% SH: 20%	SA: 18% SH: 31%	SA: 33% SH: 23%
The spring finding of females being more likely to have eaten has been reversed in the fall census; no difference this summer	f: 91% m: 77%	f: 77% m: 94%	f: 81% m: 84%
The first two censuses found about one in three having made any money on census day	34%	33%	question altered
The fall data show less reliance on drug dealing and relatively more reliance on panhandling from the spring to the fall count			question altered
Sex trade	14	7	
Other employment	10	7	
Panhandling	5	6	
Drug dealing	4	0	
An increase was seen in the fall for the proportion receiving no public assistance, followed by a drop in the summer; Social Assistance (SA) and Disability Assistance (DS) continue to be most common among those receiving some help	32% SA: 27 DS: 25	39% SA: 17 DS: 19	29% SA: 68 DS: 25
Economic poverty looms larger and larger among major barriers to getting a place of one's own:			
Lack of money or job, or lack of affordable housing	37	46	163
Addictions	28	19	43
Transportation	1	5	4
Mental illness	0	3	6

CONCLUSIONS

Total numbers

The staggering total of 300 homeless persons, as counted on this census, came as a surprise, considering it was twice the April 2005 count (149) and three times the November 2005 total (99). A couple factors can explain some, *but only some*, of that increase.

First, the presence of the Living Room provided a means not available previously for obtaining data from many couch surfers, who frequent that drop-in centre and were counted there. Yet, that group totaled under 50.

Second, contrasted with the November count especially, this one was more comprehensive in that all the shelters and service facilities were covered. Interviews at service facilities and shelters combined numbered 61 in April, 39 in the fall, and 135 this time. Of the 135, 47 were from shelters, meaning 88 were from meal sites, the drop-in centre, etc. That figure of 88 is 40-50 more than counted previously at service facilities. This third count tallied 82 interviews on the street, an increase from the prior street counts of 49 and 46.

So, while some of the large increase can be attributed to these methodology differences, one is still left with the inescapable conclusion that Nanaimo's homelessness problem had grown over the November 2005-July 2006 period.

Seasonal fluctuations

With the more seasonable weather of the summer, it is not surprising to find more homeless persons, just as fewer were found in the cold weather last November. So, some of the growth in numbers can be attributed to weather.

It was noted in the Introduction that this count was also testing the hypothesis about a "summer influx" of persons coming to Nanaimo. The data collected do not support this conjecture. Only 22 persons (9%) interviewed said they were just visiting or passing through, and the proportion who had been in town under two months before the interview was no greater than found on the first two counts. An examination of the data about the length of homelessness and how long one has been in Nanaimo to see if persons coming here were already homeless found one such person.

Length of homelessness

The average length of residence in Nanaimo, which was 8+ years on the April count and 10+ years on the November count, was found this time to be close to 13 years. Coupled with the large numbers who have been homeless under a year (65%) and the small percentage (9-10%) who said they had been counted on a previous census, this leads one to conclude that Nanaimo's homeless population consists mostly of people who become homeless here, and who stay homeless for a short time. Furthermore, that population keeps turning over with new homeless persons replacing those who manage to exit that situation.

At the same time, however, there is a group of a few dozen persons who might be described as "chronically homeless" - living three or five or more years on the street. Thirty respondents in this July sample met the three-year criterion of being on the street. On several factors they were found to be significantly different than those homeless less than three years (non-chronic):

- there is a slight trend for the chronic group to be more female than the non-chronic group (60% vs 43%)
- the long time group contains relatively more First Nations (25%) than the others (12%)
- the chronic group is less likely to be staying at a shelter (7% vs. 24%), more likely to be sleeping rough (41% vs. 23%), and more likely to be dividing their time between the sleeping rough and couch surfing (14% vs. 5%)

- the average time in Nanaimo was 17.6 years for the chronically homeless group vs. 11.4 years for those homeless a shorter time
- a relationship breakup was more often a factor in the chronic group becoming homeless (50%) than for the other, and eviction was less often a factor (13% vs. 35%)
- the long-term homeless group shows poorer physical health (but no difference on mental health)
- members of the chronic group more commonly earn money in the sex trade (46%) than for the others (22%)
- nine of the 30 in the chronic group are First Nation or Metis women; five of those are in their twenties, and all those five are involved with the sex trade

Consistencies and emerging patterns

The latest sample is older by a couple years on average, it contains relatively more Metis persons, and its members have been in Nanaimo even longer than the prior samples. Other demographic items, however, remain relatively consistent across the three counts, e.g.:

- gender-breakdown, roughly 55%-45% male-to-female
- males being older by 5 or so years
- the oldest group being heavily male
- roughly 2/3 being Caucasian
- females not being alone as often
- proportion not eating on census day (1 in 6 or 7)

The earlier spring-to-fall comparison concluded that with the arrival of cold weather, the count of homeless persons had shrunk and the remaining population was comprised of more destitute persons, who were less able to find *some* place out of the cold. This summer sample is first of all greatly enlarged, but also shows signs of longer term homelessness. More of the current respondents point to addiction and financial factors behind their homelessness and more are sleeping rough. (One contrary positive trend were the more positive reports of health). While the overwhelming majority of Nanaimo's homeless continue to be short-termers (under a year), the group referred to here as "chronically homeless" - three years or more, is growing.

*B. Jones, August 28, 2006
assisted by Cynthia Field*

SUMMER 2006 CENSUS OF HOMELESSNESS IN NANAIMO

Survey team leader _____ Route #/name _____

Other team members _____

Date _____ Location: Shelter (_____) Private residence

Time _____ Street (_____) Other (_____)

ABOUT PRIMARY RESPONDENT

* Have you already been interviewed by our team today? Yes No

Were you part of the censuses we did in Nanaimo last year? Yes No Unsure/Don't recall

* Gender: Female Male What is your age: _____

* Are you? Caucasian First Nations Metis Other

* What's your current housing situation? _____

Are you homeless alone: Yes No
IF NO: Who are the others? (Age, sex, relationship) _____

* Are you Visiting Nanaimo, or do you live here? Other _____

* IF VISITING, Where did you come from? _____

* IF VISITING, What brought you to Nanaimo? _____

* IF LIVE HERE, How long have you lived in Nanaimo? _____

How long have you been homeless in Nanaimo? _____

How did you become homeless? _____ >>

Did you have a meal somewhere today? Yes No Not yet
IF YES, where? _____

How do you get your money? _____

* How is your physical health? Good Fair Poor

* How is your mental health? Good Fair Poor

* What is your biggest barrier to getting a home of your own? _____

* Is there anything else you'd like to share with us? _____

Check all that apply, with dates
<input type="checkbox"/> job loss _____
<input type="checkbox"/> relationship break-up _____
<input type="checkbox"/> addictions _____
<input type="checkbox"/> rent too expensive _____
<input type="checkbox"/> evicted _____
<input type="checkbox"/> health issue _____
<input type="checkbox"/> injury _____
<input type="checkbox"/> family conflict _____
<input type="checkbox"/> ran out of money _____

Thank you very much for your help with this census.

Base camp phone #: 713 1402