



Hard Times

A Portrait of Street Level Social Problems in
Western Canada

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Seizing the opportunities, and effectively addressing the challenges, facing Canada's big cities is critical to both economic prosperity and quality of life in Canada. The Canada West Foundation's Western Cities Project has been providing timely and accessible information about urban issues since 2000. The project is focused on six western Canadian urban areas (Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon and Winnipeg) but it speaks to issues that affect urban areas across Canada.

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Executive Summary

Canada's big cities are some of the best places in the world in which to live. However, while most residents enjoy a high quality of life, others are struggling with a number of social challenges. Using six western Canadian urban cities (the Greater Vancouver Region, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg) as case studies, the *Core Challenges Initiative* examines the street level social problems—such as homelessness, street prostitution, and street drug activity—that tend to be concentrated in the core areas (downtowns and inner city neighbourhoods) of large urban areas.

Hard Times provides an overview of the street level social problems evident in the six cities. The report answers two key questions:

- What street level social problems do the core areas of the Greater Vancouver Region, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon and Winnipeg currently face?
- What are the implications of these problems for cities and what are the risks if they are not addressed?

Qualitative research was conducted to create a picture of street level social problems in western Canadian cities from the perspectives of frontline workers, experts, and community leaders. In total, 311 individuals were consulted.

Although direct comparisons across the cities are not always possible, a number of common themes and findings emerged. In terms of the street level social challenges in the six cities, homelessness (including hidden homelessness and those at risk of becoming homeless) and drug activity were reported to be large issues. Prostitution was also reported to be an issue in each city. Street gang activity was reported to be a large challenge in Regina, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg and, although it was identified as less of an issue in the other cities, it was identified as a growing concern. Panhandling and graffiti were reported to be minor issues in comparison to the other street level challenges in cities.

Other key themes include: problems are intensifying; issues are interconnected and increasing in complexity; issues are concentrated in inner city neighbourhoods and, more specifically, on certain blocks and streets; and youth involvement in street level social problems is a growing concern.

Street level social issues affect individuals, families, neighbourhoods, businesses, governments, and cities as a whole. The broad community implications identified by the participants include: social fragmentation and the growing social divide in cities; threats to perceived and actual public safety; poor health outcomes; higher long-term government service costs; loss of business or reduced business investment in certain areas; and negative city image. On a positive note, participants identified the potential for increased community building and greater resident and community investment in inner city neighbourhoods.

1. Introduction

The quality of life in Canada's big cities is very high. At the same time, our cities face a wide range of challenges, from traffic congestion and urban sprawl to gangs and homelessness.

In 2006, the Canada West Foundation's *Core Challenges Initiative* (CCI) was launched to inform and generate debate about the social challenges facing Canada's large urban areas. Using six western Canadian cities (the Greater Vancouver Region, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon and Winnipeg) as case studies, the CCI is focused on the street level social problems that tend to be found in the core areas (downtowns and inner city neighbourhoods) of large urban areas. Homelessness, prostitution, and drug dealing are examples of street level challenges that, while not limited to the core areas of our cities, are often concentrated in inner city areas.

Based on extensive consultation with individuals whose work touches on street level social problems, *Hard Times* answers two key questions:

- ➔ What street level social problems do the core areas of the Greater Vancouver Region, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon and Winnipeg currently face?
- ➔ What are the implications of these problems for cities and what are the risks if they are not addressed?

The overarching goal of the *Core Challenges Initiative* is to identify public policy options that will help those caught up in street level social problems and increase the vitality of inner city areas. Although discussion of specific public policy options will be left for future CCI reports, *Hard Times* draws attention to a public policy tension that exists in each city. Namely, there are differing views on how street level social problems should be addressed: while some focus on helping those struggling with street level social problems, others focus on cleaning up the inner city to increase safety and business investment. *Hard Times* incorporates both perspectives.

2. Methodology and Definitions

The report is based on the perceptions of frontline workers, experts, and community leaders in each of the cities under consideration. When available, quantitative statistics are cited to complement the qualitative findings, but it is important to note that reliable statistics are in short supply and, when they are available, are often not comparable across jurisdictions. Hence this report relies on qualitative research—research that provides for a deeper understanding of the situation in each city than numerical statistics can provide.

In early 2007, members of the research team spent a week in each of the six cities meeting with key informants. A total of 165 individuals were consulted through group meetings or individual interviews. Prior to these site visits, an electronic survey was conducted between November 23, 2006 and December 15, 2006. The survey was completed by 181 individuals whose work touches on street level social problems, with over 60% of respondents reporting that they have been working to address street level social problems for over 10 years. The electronic survey provided the research team with a general sense of the broad issues facing each city, and these themes were explored to a greater depth during face-to-face meetings.

Between the survey and the face-to-face meetings, 311 different individuals were consulted (see Figure 1). It should be stressed that the focus was on engaging frontline workers (including representatives from social service agencies, support services, and police services), experts, and community leaders rather than on engaging people who are personally struggling with street level social problems (e.g., homeless individuals), inner city residents, or business owners. Participants were targeted because they work directly with street level issues and have hands-on knowledge of the current situation and can speak to the changes that

are taking place in each city. In some cities, members of community and resident associations as well as business associations also participated.

Figure 1: Electronic Survey and Face-to-Face Respondents by Urban Area

	Electronic Survey Only	Face-to-Face Only	Both Electronic Survey and Face-to-Face	Total
Vancouver	35	17	8	60
Calgary	32	10	3	45
Edmonton	16	36	4	56
Regina	13	35	11	59
Saskatoon	23	22	5	50
Winnipeg	26	10	4	40
Other	1			1
TOTAL	146	130	35	311

Hard Times focuses on the street level manifestations of homelessness, prostitution, illegal drug use, and gangs as well as panhandling and graffiti. The following descriptions are intended to provide a general introduction and overview of each issue included in this report. It should be noted that standardized definitions are lacking for many street level issues and definitions of concepts such as homelessness are still being debated. It is also important to note that street level problems are complex and many of the issues are interconnected.

Homelessness

At a very basic level, homelessness is the absence of an acceptable place to live. People without housing are diverse and include men, women, youth, seniors, families, long-time Canadians, and new immigrants. Homelessness can affect people of any age, gender or ethnic background. For some, homelessness is a temporary situation; for others, it is a long-term reality (often referred to as chronic homelessness). Building on the definition used by the United Nations, this report discusses three categories of homelessness. The absolute homeless are those who have no shelter of their own and either live outdoors (the street homeless) or rely on social service agencies (the sheltered homeless) for a place to stay. The hidden (or invisible) homeless are those who cannot afford a place of their own and are housed privately by “couch surfing” with family or friends. The at risk homeless are those who face circumstances that make it likely that they will become homeless (e.g., impending eviction, rising rents, low income, the need to flee an abusive partner, addiction, or unsafe housing conditions). The hidden and at risk homeless populations are thought to be much larger than the absolute homeless population.

Prostitution

Prostitution is the exchange of sexual services for money, drugs, or other commodities (Dalla 2002). The sex trade and the sex industry take place across a spectrum: on the street; in brothels; through escort services; and in massage parlors. The street level sex trade is the most visible and is considered the most dangerous form of prostitution (Dalla 2002).

Street Drug Activity

Although drug activity in cities is present in many neighbourhoods and occurs in a variety of places (e.g., houses, parks, and schools), this report focuses on the drug activity that is visible on the street in downtown and inner city areas (including drug activity centred around particular buildings such as “crack houses”). Marijuana grow-ops, which tend to be found in suburban or rural areas, are not included in this report.

Street Gangs

A street gang is typically defined as a group of young people who are engaged in low-level criminal activity that is typically based in a specific geographical area (Government of Canada 2004). Street gangs tend to be connected to higher level criminal

organizations and do their “dirty work” at the street level. Street gangs generally do not carry out sophisticated or large scale criminal acts, but their propensity for violence is very high (Government of Canada 2004).

Panhandling

Panhandling is generally defined as the act of stopping people on the street to ask for assistance (National Anti-Poverty Organization 1999). Others think of panhandling as asking a stranger for food or money. Aggressive panhandling attracts a lot of public and government attention and is considered to be threatening, obstructing, following, or using abusive language toward other people while soliciting money. This is an important distinction because in some provinces, (e.g., British Columbia through the *Safe Streets Act*) aggressive panhandling is considered to be an illegal act while panhandling in general is not.

Graffiti

Graffiti is a form of vandalism that is “written” without permission on both public and private spaces such as buildings, bridges, and dumpsters. While many of those we consulted do not consider graffiti to be an important street level social problem, it is an issue for both residents and business owners. Graffiti also contributes to the perception that certain areas are unsafe.

3. Street Level Social Problems: The Current Situation

The nature of street level social problems varies by city and over time. Consequently, direct comparisons are not always possible. In addition, there are gaps and inconsistencies in the empirical statistics on street level social problems. Indeed, it is often difficult to assess whether problems are getting better or worse within individual cities let alone whether they are getting better or worse across jurisdictions. Despite the scarcity of useful empirical statistics, the perceptions and opinions of those who work to address street level social problems provide a good sense of the nature of the problems and how they have been changing in recent years.

3.1 The Current Situation in the Greater Vancouver Region

The Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) is comprised of 21 municipalities. In order to fully grasp the street level social problems in this area, the spatial distribution of these issues, and the extent to which the issues are changing, the entire region was examined rather than just the City of Vancouver itself.

At one time, street level social problems may have been largely confined to the City of Vancouver, and to the Downtown Eastside (DTES) in particular, but times have changed and so have street level social problems in the Vancouver area. As one participant stated, “you cannot pull down an iron curtain around the DTES because the issues, the people, and the communities are all connected.”

Several consultation participants noted that, while street level social problems are concentrated in the DTES, other municipalities are facing similar issues. “Pockets of street level social problems seem to follow the SkyTrain line, while other communities without the SkyTrain, such as Richmond and the North Shore, are not experiencing the same intensity as communities that have the rail link.”

There are eight Regional Town Centres in the GVRD. These centres have a concentration of jobs, housing, shopping, services, and regional transportation connections. The Regional Town Centres function like “downtown cores” and participants noted that street level social problems, where evident outside the City of Vancouver, are concentrated in these “downtown areas.” More specifically, Metrotown in Burnaby and the Whalley/Centre City area in Surrey were identified as areas with concentrated street level social problems. It was also noted that even smaller places such as the Tri-Cities of Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam and Port Moody are experiencing street level social problems.

Within the City of Vancouver, street level social problems are reported to be spreading to areas outside of the DTES, including the West End, Kitsilano, and a general migration of people and street level social problems further east along Hastings Street.

Participants from the Vancouver area identified homelessness as the most important issue in their communities. Drug activity and prostitution were also identified as key issues. There is an overall sense that street level social problems are intensifying, becoming more complex, and spreading out. There is also a sense that these will continue if they are not addressed.

3.1.1 Homelessness

Homelessness was identified as the main street level social problem in the Vancouver area. As one participant noted, “homelessness is more acutely felt in the DTES, but all communities in the GVRD are facing this issue.”

Participants were quick to point out that the current homelessness problem in the Vancouver area did not develop overnight. Participants noted the rising cost of real estate and rent, an overall lack of affordable housing options, the closure or conversion of single room occupancy hotels in the DTES, and the greater number of transients from other parts of BC and Canada who are choosing the Vancouver area as their final destination. “The warmer winters and open drug market in the DTES attract people to the Vancouver area.” In addition, a number of participants noted the rise in homelessness and the closure of mental health facilities. However, many felt that the majority of the homeless population is not transient and that most homeless people in the area, particularly in the DTES, have been in the community for some time. As one participant explained, “at one point they may have been from somewhere else, but they have been here for so long that this is now their home.”

Several participants noted that they have seen a visible change in the number of people on the street over the past five years, and most survey respondents said that the problem is worse than it was five years ago. The 2005 Greater Vancouver Homeless Count found that the number of homeless people had almost doubled between 2002 and 2005. In addition, shelters, safe houses, and transition houses turned away 169 adults and 6 children on the day of the count—a 58% increase from the number of people turned away in 2002 (Social Planning and Research Council of BC 2005). Figure 2 highlights the homeless population changes from 2002 to 2005. It should be noted that the homeless count is considered to be a conservative estimate of the total number of homeless persons in the GVRD as the nature of homelessness (e.g., the hidden homeless and those camping in isolated areas) makes it difficult to accurately measure the true size of the homeless population.

Between 2002 and 2005, the street homeless population increased at a much greater rate than other types of homelessness. The number of street homeless increased from 333 in 2002 to 1,127 in 2005 (Social Planning and Research Council of BC 2005)—a 238% increase in just three years. Just over half (53%) of the total homeless population is considered to be non-sheltered and living on the streets (Social Planning and Research Council of BC 2005). In addition, the length of time that people are staying homeless is longer than in previous years (Figure 3). The number of people in the Vancouver area who were homeless for more than a year at the time of the 2005 count was 628, an increase of 462 people from 2002.

Figure 2: GVRD Homeless Population Change 2002 to 2005

Number Homeless	2002	2005	Change	% Change
Sheltered	788	1,047	259	+33%
Street	333	1,127	794	+238%
Total Homeless	1,121	2,174	1,053	+94%

Source: Social Planning and Research Council of BC 2005

The homeless count highlights that the homeless population is not homogeneous and is comprised of diverse subpopulations. Identifying and understanding this diversity is critical as a one-size-fits-all solution will not address the needs of everyone who is homeless. Consultation participants identified two groups that need particular attention: youth and families. The homeless count reveals that a greater number of homeless persons under the age of 19 and a greater number of homeless persons with a spouse or partner were choosing to stay outside on the street and were not sleeping in shelters. These numbers may reflect the lack of appropriate facilities available for these two groups.

Figure 3: Length of Time Homeless

Length of Time Homeless	Vancouver Area					
	Total Homelessness 2002		Total Homelessness 2005		Change between 2002-2005	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Less than 1 week	98	12%	149	8%	51	+52%
1 week to under 1 month	222	26%	275	16%	53	+24%
1 month to 6 months	253	30%	460	26%	207	+82%
6 months to under 1 year	100	12%	262	15%	162	+162%
1 year or more	166	20%	628	35%	462	+278%
Total respondents	839	100%	1,774	100%		
Not stated	211	81.8	283	81.8		
TOTAL	1,050		2,057			

Source: Social Planning and Research Council of BC 2005

Consultation participants argued that, despite the drop in the number of homeless youth recorded by the 2005 count compared to the 2002 count (76 versus 124), the number of youth homeless has actually increased. Participants felt that the lower count does not indicate an actual drop in the youth homeless population, but a drop in the number of youth who are accessing services that primarily target adults. As one participant stated, “there are few services available for youth and they do not want to go to the adult shelters for many reasons, including safety. There is a big difference between someone who is 18 and someone who is 45, and they cannot be treated the same.”

Rather than being isolated to one area, homelessness is increasing throughout the GVRD. Not too long ago, homelessness was only visible in the DTES, but now almost every municipality in the Vancouver area is faced with this problem. The 2005 Greater Vancouver Homeless Count grouped the homeless population into six geographic sub-regions: Vancouver; Inner Municipalities; North Shore; South of Fraser; North East Sector; and Ridge Meadows. The majority (63%) of the homeless population is in Vancouver, while 21% is in the South of Fraser sub-region (Social Planning and Research Council of BC 2005). The sheltered homeless are concentrated in Vancouver (74%) whereas the street homeless population is somewhat more evenly distributed throughout the region with 53% in Vancouver, 29% in the South of Fraser sub-region, and 10% in the Inner Municipalities (Social Planning and Research Council of BC 2005).

Between 2002 and 2005, five of the six sub-regions experienced increases in their homeless populations. Notably, the homeless population grew by 192% in the North East Sector, 133% in the South of Fraser, and 106% in Vancouver. Only the Ridge Meadows sub-region declined in the 2005 count (-32%).

Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of homeless persons in the GVRD based on municipal data. The City of Surrey had the highest number of homeless persons outside of the City of Vancouver. Surrey counted 371 persons on March 15, 2005 while the City of Vancouver counted 1,291. Again, the homeless count is considered to be a low estimate of the total homeless population.

Figure 4: Location of Homeless Persons in the GVRD, 2005

Area	Total Homeless Persons
Burnaby	40
Coquitlam	3
Delta/White Rock	11
Langley (City and Township)	54
Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows	42
New Westminster	92
North Vancouver District and City	83
Port Coquitlam	35
Port Moody	0
Richmond	33
Surrey	371
Vancouver	1,291
West Vancouver	2

Source: Social Planning and Research Council of BC 2005. Note: The information in this figure includes individuals who provided additional information to the interviewers. These numbers are slightly lower than in Figure 2 as not all of the people counted provided additional information.

It was pointed out that “the City of Vancouver has been saturated with homelessness, but it is now moving out into the surrounding communities.” One participant described the homeless outside of Vancouver as the “suburban homeless” and noted that this population is increasing. A number of participants commented that, as high-end condo developments replace low-rent hotels in the DTES, the outward movement of the homeless will continue.

A number of factors are reported to influence the location and movement of homeless persons. As one consultation participant suggested, “the homeless travel to where the services are, and right now the services are concentrated in the DTES.” A number of consultation participants used the term “feeder communities” to describe municipalities that lack the services to help those in need. As a result, the homeless leave their last place of permanent residence to access services

available somewhere else. Other factors reported to influence location include gentrification and revitalization, clean up and improvement initiatives, and police crackdowns.

3.1.2 Street Drug Activity

Drug use in the GVRD and the open drug market in the DTES were identified as serious problems in Vancouver.

A number of participants noted that the types of drugs on the streets are changing: “the drugs are getting harder and heroin, crystal meth, and crack cocaine are common on the street.” Harder drugs were linked to more aggressive and violent behaviour and an increase in “crimes of opportunity (theft from parked cars, for example) that are carried out to feed addictions.” As with many of the other street level social problems in the GVRD, street drug activity is reported to follow the SkyTrain line. “Open drug activity is evident at several SkyTrain stations outside of the DTES.”

Not only is the visibility of drug use thought to be increasing, but the effects of drug use and the demand for detoxification spaces are also reported to be increasing. “Detox on demand, transition housing, and treatment centres are too full and not able to meet demand. Their effectiveness is limited due to the wait times.”

Participants also identified the link between drug use, addictions, and mental health. “We need to focus on mental health rather than addictions because it is often the underlying cause of addictions.” Another participant added that “it is senseless to charge an addict for using drugs. They had a choice at one point, but they do not have a choice anymore.” As another participant stated, “the street level problems we see on the street are really street-manifested mental illness.”

Like many street level social problems, drug use is linked to other issues such as homelessness, prostitution, and crime.

3.1.3 Prostitution

Prostitution was identified as a significant street level social problem in the GVRD. Although street level prostitution is concentrated in the DTES, a number of participants noted that it is present in other communities as well. One participant specified that “street prostitution is an issue in Burnaby’s Metrotown area.” And another participant noted that “the sex trade is moving out to the motels in Surrey.”

The face of street prostitution is reported to be changing. A number of people that we consulted stated that they have seen an increase in the number of young men on the streets. Several participants linked this increase to drug use, particularly crystal meth.

The other major change reported is the number of mothers on the street. One participant noted that “some women involved in the sex trade are single moms who turn to the street the week before cheque day because they ran out of money to feed their kids.” A number of participants argued that the sex trade is used to supplement welfare income because the current welfare rates are not keeping pace with the high cost of living in the GVRD.

3.1.4 Panhandling and Graffiti

About 7 in 10 survey respondents consider panhandling to be a large problem. In general, panhandling tends to concentrate around the central business districts such as the Whalley Area in Surrey and on Robson Street in Vancouver. Panhandling in Vancouver is not an illegal act, but aggressive panhandling as defined by British Columbia’s *Safe Streets Act* is considered illegal. In addition, the City of Vancouver has a panhandling bylaw, which regulates where, when, and how panhandling takes place.

Graffiti was not reported to be a major problem facing the GVRD municipalities. A number of people said that graffiti is evident, but in comparison to the issues of homelessness and drugs, graffiti is not one of the main concerns. However, a few participants did note the implications of graffiti, such as the sense of fear that it can create, and argued that it should not be ignored.

3.1.5 Other Issues

Other issues identified by consultation participants include escalating violence, increasing rates of poverty, a lack of affordable housing, low welfare rates, a lack of resources to help those with mental illnesses and addictions, prostitution among immigrant populations, and undesirable street behaviour including public drunkenness and public urination. Overall, mental illness was a common thread through the consultations. One participant noted that “it is not only the major identifiable mental health issues such as Schizophrenia that we need to address. It is the other, less identifiable forms such as post-traumatic stress disorder, trauma, and grief that needs to be addressed.” Mental health was linked to homelessness and drug activity

3.2 The Current Situation in Calgary

In many ways, the nickname “boomtown” is an appropriate term to describe Calgary. The strong economy and job opportunities are attracting people from across Canada. Calgary’s population has increased significantly over the past five years with 35,000 people added between April 2005 and April 2006 (The City of Calgary 2006a).

Participants noted both the upsides and downsides of growth. As one participant stated, “the boom is great, but it is not great for everyone.” In particular, Calgary’s population growth has put a squeeze on the housing market. Housing prices have skyrocketed and rental vacancies have plummeted. The result is a severe shortage of affordable housing options.

During the consultations, the lack of affordable housing was a dominant theme and was linked to the rise in the number of homeless persons in Calgary. Most of the people who we consulted identified homelessness as Calgary’s greatest challenge. However, some participants argued that drug use should be viewed as the city’s greatest challenge because it is the underlying cause of many other street level social problems.

Street level social problems in Calgary are reported to be getting worse in terms of increasing numbers and the growing complexity of the issues. In particular, homelessness and street drug activity are reported to have visibly changed in the past five years. One participant noted that “we now have squeegee kids in Calgary. The people on the street today are very different than they were five years ago.” Looking ahead, participants felt that the situation will continue to deteriorate and the problems will only get worse if the issues are not addressed. One participant put it this way: “it is time to face it and embrace it.” However, the discussion was not all doom and gloom and there was a sense of optimism: “When compared to other cities in North America, Calgary is not in too bad of shape and there are many other cities in a worse situation. However, Calgary must step up, act now, and not let things deteriorate any further.”

Consultation participants reported that street level social issues are concentrated in Calgary’s downtown and inner city areas, and a number of participants identified the East Village as the neighbourhood with the greatest concentration of those involved in street level social problems. “The East Village has a concentration of street people and the services to help them. It is the sheer number that makes it so visible in this neighbourhood.”

The visibility of street level issues in Calgary’s downtown is more concentrated during the day. As one participant noted, “the homeless do not have a place to go during the day. Those people sheltered outside of the downtown are driven from the shelters and they are dropped off in the downtown with nowhere to go. They end up hanging out in public spaces because they will not get kicked out.”

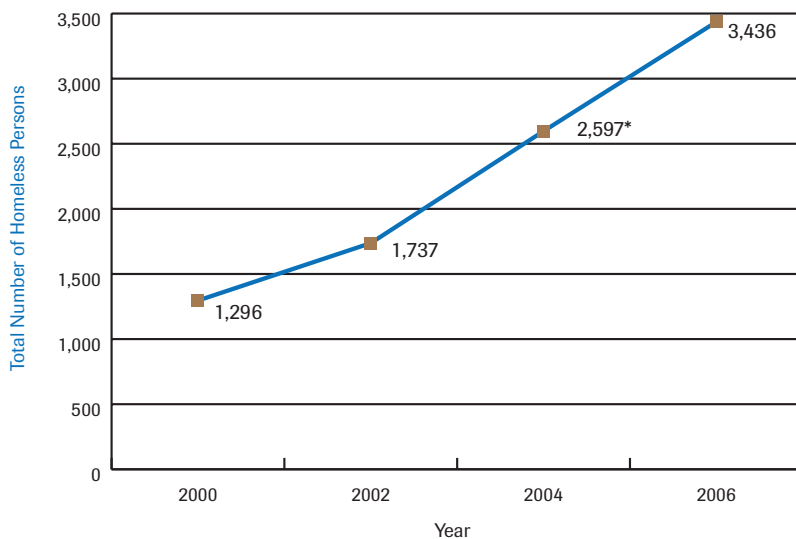
Other participants observed that pockets of street level social problems are evident in communities further from the downtown core, such as the neighbourhood of Forest Lawn. In addition, street level social problems are reported to be spreading out from the

downtown along the river valleys. There was an overall feeling that these issues are bound to spread further, especially since the inner city is becoming a trendy place to live.

3.2.1 Homelessness

The homeless count conducted on May 10, 2006 enumerated 3,436 homeless persons in the City of Calgary (The City of Calgary 2006b). This is a 32% increase over the number of homeless counted in 2004, which found 2,597 homeless persons (The City of Calgary, 2006b). Figure 5 illustrates the increase in the number of homeless persons over the past six years.

Figure 5: Total Homeless Population in City of Calgary



Source: The City of Calgary 2006b. *The methodology in 2004 expanded to include a greater number of facilities including those that provide transitional beds to the homeless. This change disproportionately increased the total number of homeless persons enumerated in 2004 compared to 2002.

Figure 6 highlights the growth in the homeless population between the 2004

and 2006 counts. Of particular interest is the large increase (238%) in the number of street homeless persons who were enumerated in 2006. It was noted that on the night of the count, the weather was seasonably warm, which may contribute to a larger number of people choosing to stay outside. Regardless of the warm weather, 82% of the homeless population stayed in shelters or with a service agency (The City of Calgary 2006b). There was a large increase in the number of turnaways from shelter facilities with 181 rejected on the day of the study, of which 147 (81%) were turned away due to lack of space in the facilities (The City of Calgary 2006b).

Figure 6: Calgary Homeless Population Change 2004 to 2006

Number Homeless	2004	2006	Change	% Change
Sheltered*	2,440	3,006	567	+23%
Street	127	429	302	+238%
Total Homeless	2,597	3,436	839	+32%

Source: The City of Calgary 2006b. *Sheltered includes homeless persons enumerated by service agencies and the homeless persons enumerated in facilities.

Based on these findings, it is not surprising participants identified homelessness as a major issue in Calgary. Homelessness has become increasingly visible over the past five years. One participant noted that “the homeless population is visibly different than it was five years ago. The numbers and the types of people on the street have changed.”

Mental illness was cited as a key factor. In addition, the homeless population was described as highly transient, with a lot of movement between Calgary, Edmonton, and Vancouver.

Many participants also noted that Calgary’s homeless population has been underestimated for some time. “The Calgary Drop-In Centre was designed with a 10-year capacity in mind, but it filled up almost as soon as it opened.” Another participant added that, “people did not necessarily move here because of the [Drop-In] Centre; they were here already and were hidden in parks or couch surfing with friends.” Another participant added that “the shelters are becoming home to students and the working poor. Shelters are moving from emergency housing to a more permanent home for people. This is not what they were built for.”

There was much discussion about what is contributing to the significant increase in homelessness. Some participants argued that Calgary is known to be a good place to be homeless and is a destination for people. Others felt that Calgary is promoted nationally as the “promised land” and is attracting many newcomers, some of whom do not earn enough money to make ends meet and find themselves homeless. Most participants agreed that the limited affordable housing options available in Calgary are fuelling the rising numbers. “Many of the people living in the shelters have jobs and are working, but they cannot afford a place to live.”

The lack of affordable housing in Calgary was a dominant theme: “the current housing situation is such that it is not enough to have a household income of \$50,000 a year if you want to enter the housing market.” Participants noted rising rental costs, condo conversions, and the lack of new rental units being built as having significant effects on low cost options and housing choice. One participant asked, “if the working poor and students are living in the shelters, where do the people who historically relied on the shelters end up?” In response, another participant said, “I guess they are the ones who end up on the street or sleeping on park benches.”

Homeless youth, seniors, and families were identified as growing concerns in Calgary. “Seniors are trying to survive on a fixed income that is not keeping pace with the rising cost of living. The situation is likely to only get worse.” Another participant added that “the number of homeless seniors is alarming. These seniors are often in very poor physical health.”

Over the past six years, the number of families enumerated in the biennial homeless count has increased from 104 families in 2004 to 145 in 2006 (The City of Calgary 2006b). (The Calgary homeless count defines a family as a couple, a couple with one or more children or a lone adult with one or more children.) The homeless count in Calgary confirms the observations of those we consulted: homelessness is a major and growing problem in Calgary and has increased significantly in recent years.

3.2.2 Street Drug Activity

Drug use was identified as a large and growing issue in Calgary. Some consultation participants identified drugs as the number one issue on the grounds that drug use is often the underlying cause of other street level social problems. As one participant stated, “organized crime, property crime, and prostitution are fuelled by the drug problem.”

Many consultation participants noted the increased visibility of drug use and drug dealing in the inner city. “The visible nature of the problem is getting worse. Drug use tended to be hidden in the past. Often groups would sneak off and hide in a park. Now, you can find large groups of people, sometimes over 20 people, doing drugs right in the street.”

Many participants raised concerns over the growing open drug market in Calgary and reported that the types of drugs on Calgary’s streets are changing and are getting harder. Crack houses were also identified as a problem.

3.2.3 Prostitution

Street prostitution is reported to be evident in some Calgary neighbourhoods and on certain streets in particular. In both Calgary and Edmonton, consultation participants noted that the sex trade workers are getting visibly younger. “Most prostitutes begin working in the sex trade before they are 18. They are not always drug addicted when they begin the trade, but become so to cope.”

3.2.4 Panhandling and Graffiti

Panhandling is evident in Calgary’s downtown core and in several shopping areas in the inner city. A 2003 Cameron Strategy City Omnibus Survey estimated that there were 60 panhandlers in Calgary’s downtown core, most visibly on Stephen Avenue, 17th Avenue, and along other high traffic roads in and out of the downtown area.

To some participants, panhandling is a minor issue that is perceived to be more of a problem in Calgary than it really is. However, other participants argued that regardless of whether it is perception or reality, panhandlers in a shopping area can create a sense of unease and fear that may limit where people will go, thereby negatively affecting businesses.

For the most part, graffiti was not identified as a major issue in Calgary. However, a number of people did comment that graffiti is an issue for the downtown and inner city businesses. Others added that it is difficult to compare the issues of homelessness and street drug activity with graffiti.

3.2.5 Other Issues

Participants identified a number of other issues evident in Calgary that are not street level social problems as defined in this project. These issues include poverty, racism, and a lack of resources for youth, individuals with addictions, and individuals living with mental illness.

3.3 The Current Situation in Edmonton

Edmonton, like Calgary, has experienced significant economic and population growth. This growth has affected the city’s ability to address the street level social problems evident in the downtown and inner city areas. “The services and resources available were designed for a city with a population of 500,000 and they cannot keep up with the growing needs of a larger city.”

Growth was viewed as both a positive and negative by participants: “there is increased wealth and prosperity for some Edmontonians, but there are others who are being left behind.” Another participant added that, “despite all the new jobs in Alberta, the employment rate for the population that I serve has not increased.”

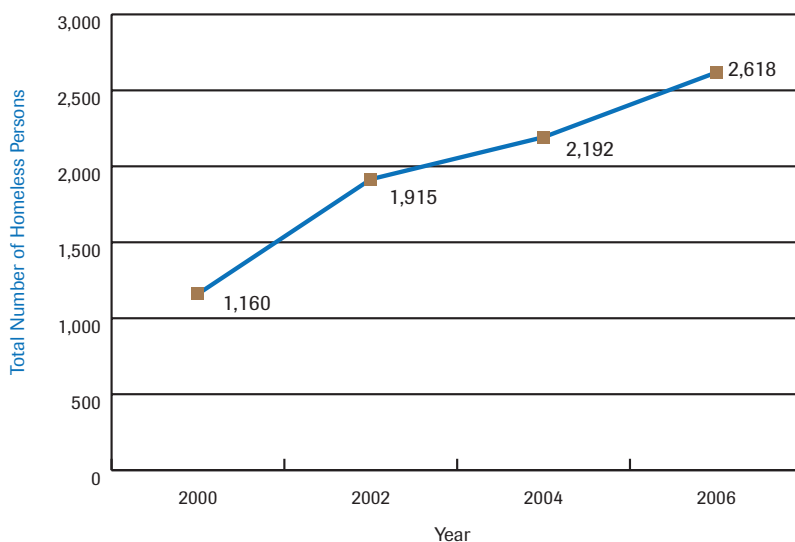
The effects of growth were a common theme at the consultations and many participants were quick to note that, while the boom has not caused the street level social problems in Edmonton, it is thought to be exaggerating them. Other participants acknowledged that the situation is not entirely new and that Edmonton went through similar growing pains back in the 1970s and 1980s, including the rapid increase in street level social problems. However, a number of people we consulted noted two main differences: the types of street drugs now present in Edmonton; and the extent of youth involvement in street level social problems.

Participants identified homelessness and drug activity as Edmonton’s greatest street level social challenges. As in Calgary, drug use was seen as a keystone issue: “drugs drive street prostitution, crime, robberies, and gangs. Drugs are the underlying cause and link between many street level social problems.”

Overall, the problems are thought to be intensifying. Participants reported that there has been an increase in the number of street people in the downtown, an increase in the number of people staying in shelters, an increase in property crime including vehicle break-ins, and “skyrocketing” numbers accessing drop-in services at front line agencies. Despite a general lack of quantitative statistics, those working directly at the street level feel that these problems are not getting better and are not going to go away on their own.

When the participants were asked to identify areas of their city where street level social problems are concentrated, a number of specific areas were mentioned. These areas include the parking lots and back alleys throughout the downtown and inner city, the North Saskatchewan River valley, the Greyhound bus station, 118th Avenue, Whyte Avenue, and the public spaces in the downtown core. Generally speaking, the neighbourhoods surrounding the municipal airport were identified as areas where street level social problems are concentrated.

Figure 7: Total Homeless Population in City of Edmonton



Source: Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing 2004 and 2006 and Edmonton Homelessness Count Committee 2000 and 2002.

There was a sense that street level social problems were at one time very concentrated in the downtown, but that the people and the issues are spreading out and are present in several communities. For example, one participant stated that “homeless persons can be found throughout the city, in parks, open spaces, and in the river valley.”

3.3.1 Homelessness

The homeless count conducted on October 17, 2006 found 2,618 homeless persons in the City of Edmonton (Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing 2006). This is a 19% increase over the number of homeless persons found during the last count in October 2004, which enumerated 2,192 homeless persons. Since September 2000, the total number of homeless persons

has increased 126% from 1,160. Figure 7 illustrates the increase in the number of homeless persons over the past six years.

Based on the overall numbers and the increases that Edmonton is experiencing, it is not surprising that homelessness was viewed by many participants as the greatest street level social problem facing Edmonton.

Figure 8: Edmonton Homeless Population Change 2004 to 2006

Number Homeless	2004	2006	Change	% Change
Sheltered	740	844	104	+14%
Street	1,452	1,774	322	+22%
Total Homeless	2,192	2,618	426	+19%

Source: Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing 2004 and 2006

Looking at the growth in the homeless population counts between the 2004 and 2006 (Figure 8), it is interesting to note that the increase in the number of street homeless or absolute homeless is greater than the number of homeless in the shelters. In addition, the number of individuals and families who were turned away from shelters in 2006 was 2.4 times greater than in 2004 (Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing 2006).

The homeless count reveals that almost the same number of homeless families slept on the street as were sheltered. This could be an indication of the lack of facilities to meet the needs of families. In addition, a high percentage of homeless persons between the ages of 17 and 30 (19%) and the ages of 31 and 54 (38%) are sleeping on the street (Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing 2006). One participant noted that “the homeless population is changing and the number of new, younger homeless is increasing. This population does not mix well with the older clients that have been traditionally housed in shelters.”

The 2006 homeless count confirms that Edmonton experienced an increase in the number of young people on the street. In 2006, 497 street homeless persons between the ages of 17 and 30 were counted—an increase of 36.5% from 2004 (Edmonton Joint Planning Committee on Housing 2006).

A number of factors are thought to be contributing to the homeless situation in Edmonton. The lack of adequate and affordable housing and the increase in the number of transients, especially young people, coming to Edmonton were factors noted at the consultations. As one participant stated, “increasing demand and rising costs combined with the lack of new rental units being built are putting a tight squeeze on affordable housing options.”

Most of the people we consulted felt that the homeless situation in Edmonton will not improve on its own and is likely to get worse in the next five years.

3.3.2 Street Drug Activity

Drugs were identified as one of the largest issues facing Edmonton. Drugs are thought to be the underlying cause of many street level social problems including violence, aggressive behaviour, homelessness, and prostitution. As one participant stated, “the drug problem is the predominant driver behind many of the other problems that Edmonton faces including homicides, crime, street prostitution, and gang activity.”

Participants noted that street drug activity is changing and that the drugs are getting cheaper and more readily available. “The toxicity of the street drugs is changing and the number of entrenched drug users on our streets is increasing. In the past, youth would engage in drug activity and then grow out of it. Now many youth are ending up on our streets.” Related to these changes, a participant reported that “the number of calls to EMS for drug-related emergencies has increased significantly.”

3.3.3 Street Gang Activity

Street gang activity in Edmonton was identified as a growing problem in the city. One participant explained that “gangs in Edmonton are diverse and include everything from organized crime such as the Hells Angels to street gangs.” Another participant added that “the different types of gangs are connected and the Aboriginal street gangs are doing the dirty work for organized crime.”

A number of participants reported that the “face of street gangs” is changing and that the number of young people involved in gang activity is increasing. As one participant stated, “younger and younger youth are seen hanging out on the street corners. These youth are being recruited into gangs at a very young age.” Another argued that “gangs can provide a sense of belonging that is otherwise lacking from their family and their communities.”

Overall, there was a general sense that the number of street gangs and the number of individuals involved in gang activity is increasing.

3.3.4 Prostitution

Street level prostitution was seen as a large problem and a number of the people who we consulted felt that there is a strong connection between drug activity and street prostitution. One of the reported changes in street prostitution is the average age of the people on the street. Many participants commented that sex trade workers are getting younger, and that this is highly visible in some areas of the city.

3.3.5 Panhandling and Graffiti

Panhandling and graffiti were not identified as large problems by consultation participants. The issues of homelessness, drugs, and gangs are such large issues that they tended to dominate the consultation discussions. Issues like panhandling and graffiti were viewed as minor when compared to other street level social problems. However, a few participants did report that panhandling is evident in the downtown and along Whyte Avenue, and argued that panhandling can influence people’s perception of safety and their willingness to visit and shop in certain areas.

3.3.6 Other Issues

A number of other issues evident in Edmonton were raised during the consultations. Although these issues are not street level social problems as defined in this report, they provide a broader picture of the social issues evident in Edmonton. Some of the issues discussed include a lack of services and supports for the mentally ill; inadequate housing and resources on Aboriginal reserves; problems with the child welfare system; a lack of supports for the underprivileged and for single mothers; a lack of decent housing for low income earners; breakdown of community and families; a lack of opportunities for new Canadians; social exclusion; racism; and poverty.

3.4 The Current Situation in Regina

Regina’s street level social problems are reported to be concentrated in the inner city, particularly in the communities of North Central and Core. Participants reported that there is a lot of movement of both people and problems between these two communities; as one participant described it, “there tends to be a focus on one community at a time. When Core starts to improve, then the focus shifts to North Central. This approach is not solving anything and just shifts the problems back and forth.” However, another participant noted that this may have been the case in the past, but, “at this time, these communities are being focused on simultaneously.”

A number of participants were quick to point out that the downtown area, or the Central Business District, is doing well and is attracting new development and business investment. Rather, “it is the ring of neighbourhoods around the downtown that have been neglected and become run down.” In addition to the North Central and Core communities, street level social problems are reported to be evident in other inner city neighbourhoods such as Al Ritchie and Eastview. Although neighbourhoods as a whole are reported to suffer from negative perceptions and stigmas, participants noted that street level social problems occur at a more finite scale and are often concentrated in specific areas or on a specific block within a neighbourhood. One participant noted that, “there are a few blocks in Al Ritchie and Eastview with problems that will need to be addressed to prevent problems from spreading out to other sections.”

Regina participants reported that key street level issues for the city include drug activity, gangs, and homelessness, problem houses, and violence. The overall sense among those we consulted is that the problems in Regina are intensifying and are becoming more complex.

3.4.1 Street Drug Activity

Drug activity was identified as a key issue and one that is thought to be more of a problem now than it was five years ago. Participants reported that, unlike other cities, Regina does not have an obvious street drug market. Instead, drug activity is reported to take place in problem houses or drug houses that are well known to the people living in the communities. A few people that we consulted noted that these homes are overcrowded, tend to have health and safety concerns such as a lack of functional plumbing and electricity, and are rundown and damaged. As one participant reported, “in some cases, the copper pipes have been ripped out of the walls and sold for money to buy drugs.” To address these types of problem houses, the *Safer Communities and Neighbourhoods Act* and the Housing Standards Enforcement Team are targeting and, if necessary, shutting down residences and commercial buildings used for illegal activities.

Participants also identified that the types of drugs are changing, which is adding to the complexity of the problems. Drugs such as solvents, cheap and low grade cocaine, and crystal meth are increasingly available; however, some participants felt that crystal meth has not become as much of a problem as it has in other Canadian cities. Other participants pointed out that alcohol is really the drug of choice in Regina and that alcohol abuse is a major concern.

The relationship between drug use and other street level social problems was noted. Specifically, drug activity was connected to prostitution and gangs. Drug use was also seen as a response to difficult situations: “when people feel that they do not have healthy alternatives, they turn to drugs to cope.” The concern over drug activity in Regina resulted in the Regina and Area Drug Strategy, which a number of participants recognized as a positive move in the city.

3.4.2 Street Gang Activity

Gangs were one of the most discussed street level social problems in Regina and were identified as a growing problem. It was noted that it is difficult to get a handle on the number of people involved in gangs, who is involved, or the extent of the implications associated with their activity. However, many people that we consulted believe that gang activity is intertwined with drug activity, prostitution, and the violence on Regina’s streets.

The concern regarding youth involvement in gangs was a dominant theme in the Regina consultations. More specifically, participants reported that gangs are targeting youth: “gang recruitment is rampant and children as young as nine years old are recruited to become drug runners.” Several participants noted that, in some cases, children are born into gangs because their parents or other family members are involved in a gang. As one participant stated, “the issues are becoming generational and for some children, their community and their socialization are entirely tied to gangs.” Another participant noted that “for some children and teens, gangs provide a sense of belonging and a community that they may not otherwise have.”

Street gangs are reported to be concentrated in the inner city neighbourhoods of Regina; however a number of people we consulted stated that gang activity and recruitment is spreading out into other communities.

3.4.3 Homelessness

Participants argued that street homelessness or visible homelessness is less of an issue in Regina than other cities such as Vancouver, Calgary, and Edmonton. However, as many of the individuals we consulted argued, there is an issue with problem houses (overcrowded, rundown houses in which the hidden or at risk homeless are living.) It is more common to have two or three generations living in the same house than it is to find someone sleeping on the street.

However, Regina does have a street homeless population that relies on shelter facilities. Regina's Mobile Crisis Services aided 788 people with homelessness as a primary or secondary issue in 2005/2006 (City of Regina 2006). It should be noted that these numbers provide a conservative estimate of the total homeless population as not all people with homelessness issues contact Mobile Crisis Services. However, the number of people on the street at any one time is likely fewer than 788 and has been estimated to fall between 100 to 125 people at any particular time (City of Regina 2006).

Of the 788 people who accessed the Mobile Crisis Services in 2005/2006, 89% were single adults without children (585 male and 115 female), 4% were single parents with children, 3% were teenagers and another 3% were couples (City of Regina 2006).

It was suggested that the lower numbers of absolute homelessness in Regina can be attributed to the fact that the city is not a destination for "new transients" and that those who come to the city typically have established networks of friends and family to which they can turn. In some cases, this leads to overcrowding and an unsafe living environment, but not necessarily to visible homelessness.

Those who find shelter by couch surfing or temporarily staying with friends and family, or those who live in unhealthy or unsafe conditions are considered to be the hidden or at risk homeless. Due to the invisible nature of these types of homelessness, it is difficult to accurately measure the true homeless population in Regina. A 2001 study found that 10% of households in Regina were at risk of homelessness (personal communication). This estimate was based on core housing need, which is a combined measure of housing availability, affordability, degree of crowding, and state of repair. Housing is considered to be affordable when it costs less than 30% of gross household income. Between 1991 and 2001, Regina's core housing need decreased from 15% to 10% despite the fact that the average amount of income spent on housing by those in core housing need rose from 45% to 51% (personal communication). Spending 50% or more of gross household income on housing is considered to be an indicator of high risk for homelessness.

Rundown or "slum houses" were also identified as contributing to the homelessness issue in Regina. As one participant stated, "many homes are overcrowded and of poor quality." In 2001, Statistics Canada found that 18% of the dwellings located in the community of North Central were in need of major repairs (Statistics Canada 2001). However, this is believed to be a very conservative estimate.

Regina inner city neighbourhoods have an aging housing stock and a high proportion of rented dwellings. The 2001 Census found that 39% of the housing stock in North Central was built prior to 1946 and 50% of the dwellings are rented (Statistics Canada 2001). Furthermore, the consultation participants noted that very little new housing is being built in North Central, but some revitalization is taking place in other inner city neighbourhoods.

Poor housing quality and affordability were reported to be the driving forces behind the high rates of mobility in Regina. A number of participants noted that there is a lot of mobility within North Central, between inner city neighbourhoods, particularly between

Core and North Central, as well as in and out of the city. As one individual stated, “this high rate of mobility adds to the high turnover rates in inner city elementary schools.”

3.4.4 Prostitution

Street level prostitution was identified as evident in several of Regina’s inner city neighbourhoods. While street prostitution is considered to be a large problem, it is not generally perceived to be a growing problem. Several consultation participants noted the link between prostitution, drug activity and gangs. The overrepresentation of the Aboriginal population in street prostitution was also noted.

3.4.5 Panhandling and Graffiti

Panhandling and graffiti were not reported to be significant issues in Regina. A number of participants argued that it is difficult to compare the issues of panhandling and graffiti to other street level issues such as drug activity and gangs.

3.4.6 Other Issues

Crime was a common topic at the Regina consultations. During the discussions, two main themes emerged: 1) the crime rate based on reported crimes has been decreasing in recent years; and 2) crime in Regina is not evenly distributed across the city, but rather clustered in certain areas. Both violent and property crime are concentrated in the downtown and inner city neighbourhoods (Wallace et al. 2006).

In addition, the consultation discussions covered a number of other topics that are not street level social problems. These issues include the high rates of poverty, especially child poverty, in the inner city; young children not attending school; breakdown of the family; lack of access to healthy food, which contributes to hunger and malnutrition; a deterioration of spirituality; youth violence; health issues due to prostitution and drug use; fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD); Aboriginal unemployment; mental illness; over-incarceration of Aboriginal youth; lower educational levels among the Aboriginal population; and a lack of social housing.

3.5 The Current Situation in Saskatoon

Street level social problems in Saskatoon are reported to be concentrated in a number of residential neighbourhoods located on the west side of the city. The areas of concern are the historic communities in close proximity to downtown, located to the west of the central business district. According to one participant, these areas “can be recognized by the poor housing stock, high crime rates, and the incidence of low income. Beyond housing, the rest of the infrastructure in the core is in poor condition, including schools, health facilities and other platforms for service delivery.”

Many of the consultation participants commented on an “east-west divide” in the city. As one participant put it, “Saskatoon is a city divided—the river is a visual divide. The east side of the city is affluent and the west side, especially the inner city, is not well off. This divide is historic and reflects the old division back in the times of the Temperance Colonies.” This division is reported to be not only geographic, but also racial: “generally speaking, the river divides the population by race with Aboriginals, new immigrants, and refugees living on the west side, and the more affluent Caucasian community on the east.”

It was also reported that problems tend to be very concentrated in Saskatoon. Street level social problems are concentrated within a few neighbourhoods and on specific streets (such as 20th Street) within communities: “in terms of neighbourhood manifestations of social problems, they appear like swiss cheese...one block may be fine while the next is covered in needles and condoms and has prostitutes standing in front of the houses.”

Two neighbourhoods were identified as having a high concentration of street level social problems: Pleasant Hill and Riversdale. The communities of City Park, Confederation, and King George were also mentioned, albeit less frequently. The lion's share of the city's prostitution and drug-related activities are reported to take place in Pleasant Hill and the neighbouring community of Riversdale. One participant stated, "the concentration of social issues in communities like Pleasant Hill makes it extremely difficult for families to make a life there, because of health and safety issues, but these families may have no other options." In 2001, 56.4% of families living in Pleasant Hill were classified as low income, spending more than 70% of their income on essentials such as shelter, food, and clothing (Statistics Canada 2001).

The Riversdale community is experiencing revitalization, and participants noted that the increasing housing prices in Riversdale have pushed some of the street level social problems westward into the community of Meadow Green. The Meadow Green community has taken a very strong proactive stance against this migration. As one participant reported, "Meadow Green is fighting back and has signs up in the community indicating that 'they will not tolerate prostitution in their neighbourhood.'" In contrast, "Pleasant Hill, as a community, has decided that they want their community to change, but not by pushing out the women who are working as prostitutes because some are mothers just trying to make ends meet. This community wants to be inclusive." A number of people we consulted were excited about a new project, Station 20 West, that will bring affordable housing, an integrated community health centre, and a library to the Pleasant Hill community. As one participant noted, "we are starting to see reinvestment in this neighbourhood."

When asked if street level social problems are getting better or worse, there was a general sense that the issues are increasing and intensifying in certain areas of the city. It was also felt that this trend would continue unless the issues are addressed.

Some participants argued that Saskatoon's street level social problems are not fully recognized by city residents: "people in Saskatoon are not aware of what is happening." As another participant put it, "although some of these issues, such as homelessness and drug activity are less visible in Saskatoon than some other cities, they are still huge issues here."

3.5.1 Street Gang Activity and Street Drug Activity

The issue of gang activity—both street level gangs (primarily Aboriginal) and gangs that represent organized crime (Hell's Angels)—was a common concern. "Gang activity is happening, but it is difficult to track and to know how many people are involved because of the subculture and underground nature of gangs. This makes it tough to gauge the scope of the problems." Participants also expressed concern about the role of children in gang activity.

Gangs are associated with at least two problems in Saskatoon. First, gangs are violent and create legitimate safety concerns amongst residents. As one participant stated, "gangs cause fear in the broader core communities because initiation rites often cause victimization of innocent, uninvolved parties, although most gang activity happens in and between gangs." It was suggested that non-gang teenagers are often targets for both recruitment and violence, and that some residents of core communities may join gangs in order to protect themselves in the neighbourhood.

The second gang-related problem that was raised relates to housing and damage to units after gangs have access. As one participant reported, "the level of damage to a house is phenomenal when a gang is present. One house that a housing coordinator entered had had all the walls ripped out." It was also reported that drug use in gangs has caused safety issues for maintenance workers and housing coordinators going into houses.

The discussion of drug activity tended to be focused on the connection between gangs and drugs.

3.5.2 Prostitution

Street level prostitution was discussed frequently in the Saskatoon. Participants argued that gangs, prostitution, and drug activity are interconnected issues for the city. Prostitution is reported to be very visible, with pockets of prostitution devoted to different age groups, including child sexual exploitation.

While there has been some spreading out of prostitution, it is reported to be mainly located in the core areas, and street prostitution is reported to be highly visible on 20th Street (known as “the stroll”). In addition to street prostitution, it was noted that some activity may also be taking place inside, and that soliciting through the Internet is another manifestation of the problem. While the city’s prostitutes are reported to be predominantly female, it was noted that the number of male prostitutes is increasing.

3.5.3 Homelessness

We were told that homelessness is increasing in Saskatoon, and that the emergency shelters, specifically the YWCA, are turning away almost as many people as they are taking in. Although limited, the available data indicate that 200 people accessed emergency shelters and transitional housing units in 2000 and that the 202 available emergency beds in the city were accessed 10,524 times between 2004 and 2005 (City of Saskatoon 2005). Among the participants, a common viewpoint is that the available emergency shelters are not enough to meet the needs of the homeless population in Saskatoon.

As in Regina, participants in Saskatoon reported that the hidden and at risk homeless population may be bigger issues than street homelessness. Housing affordability and inadequate housing (poor quality) are reported to be major issues in the city. In 2005, there were 1,600 families on the affordable housing waiting list, and the demand for affordable housing units was five times greater than the number of available units in the city (McGovern 2006).

A number of people we consulted identified the backlog of people and the problems that are being created by this backlog. Specifically, one participant noted that, “people are staying longer in subsidized housing. This used to be a stepping stone, but now it is becoming semi-permanent housing for some families.” As a result, demand is reported to be increasing, but the supply is not. Adding to the shortage of available affordable units, discrimination and racism were identified by several participants. As one participant put it, “there is a level of discrimination in the housing market as some landlords in the city won’t rent to Aboriginal people. This makes available units unavailable for people who need them.”

The west-side inner city neighbourhoods are reported to experience high mobility rates, and “the transient population has great effects on the housing stock, as well as on the vulnerability of children to becoming gang involved. In these neighbourhoods, most of the kids move many times each year, and some end up dropping out of school completely.” The quality of housing in these neighbourhoods is also an issue, as the quality of housing is reported to be “quite abysmal.” As one participant stated, “there are a number of buildings that community nurses cannot and will not enter for safety reasons, but the people living there have a great need for this health service.”

Several consultation participants noted the deteriorating housing stock in the neighbourhoods where street level social problems are concentrated. In 2005, the City of Saskatoon’s Fire and Protective Services conducted 7,308 housing inspections throughout the city. The greatest number of failed inspections occurred in dwellings in Pleasant Hill and Riversdale, with a failure rate of 74% in each neighbourhood (McGovern 2006). Pleasant Hill stood out as having the greatest overall number of failed inspections (McGovern 2006).

3.5.4 Panhandling and Graffiti

Panhandling was not reported to be a large problem for Saskatoon: “there are not a lot of panhandlers in the downtown. But in the media, panhandling is portrayed to be a major issue.” It was also argued that, regardless of numbers, “panhandling is an issue because it makes people uncomfortable, and is a deterrent to people coming downtown.”

Graffiti did not register as a large problem among Saskatoon participants.

3.5.5 Other Issues

Similar to the discussions in Regina, crime was a common topic at the Saskatoon consultations. We heard that “breaking and entering is common in some areas of Saskatoon,” and that “robberies have increased over the past five years.”

Although not specifically street level social problems, the following issues were also raised in Saskatoon: the transition from on-reserve life to city life for young Aboriginal people; violence and the perpetuation of violence, particularly among youth; pressures placed on the school systems; family breakdown; and the generational cycle of poverty.

3.6 The Current Situation in Winnipeg

Winnipeg’s “North End” is reported to be home to the city’s greatest concentration of street level social problems. The North End, which consists of 11 communities, starts north of the train tracks and includes the neighbourhoods of Lord Selkirk Park, Dufferin, William Whyte, Burrows Central, Robertson, St. John’s, Luxton, and North Point Douglas. As one participant noted, “these are the historic and older neighbourhoods of Winnipeg. Selkirk Avenue used to be the place where people came to shop and now they have a hard time attracting and retaining business in this area. These areas have become the disadvantaged and disinvested neighbourhoods in Winnipeg.”

Within the North End, there are differences across the communities. The south neighbourhoods were described as being older and poorer, with absentee landlords, but better off than the northern neighbourhoods in terms of resources. The north neighbourhoods were described as being newer, but more lacking in terms of services and resources. It was reported that street level social problems have been shifting from the south communities of the North End to the more northern neighbourhoods, in part due to a police initiative (“Operation Clean Sweep”).

One community that participants highlighted is Lord Selkirk Park, an area with a high concentration of 1960s public Manitoba housing. As one participant reported, “this area is riddled with gang activity and violence. Some resident action has been taking place and things are starting to get better.” Speaking more broadly, one participant stated that, beyond the North End, street level social problems are “also evident in pockets throughout the city where there are Manitoba Housing complexes.”

The West End—which consists of inner city communities to the west of downtown—was also mentioned as an area that has experienced some challenges; however, the West End communities of West Broadway and Spence are undergoing revitalization, which is reported to be displacing many people and problems into adjacent neighbourhoods. Old rooming houses in these communities are being turned back in to single family homes, and private investment and improvements are taking place. One participant argued that “neighbourhood change can be a double-edged sword. Improvements and the influx of new people to the area often results in higher costs for housing and the displacement of those that have lived in these communities for a long time.”

When asked if street level social problems are increasing or decreasing in Winnipeg, many participants stated that problems are worsening. As one participant stated, “this is the leading edge of a much bigger problem. If we do not address this, it is only going to get worse.”

The issues of gang activity, drug activity, prostitution and violence were predominant in both the consultations and the survey. As with Regina and Saskatoon, discussions of homelessness were focused on issues of at risk homelessness, the hidden homeless, and housing affordability and quality, rather than on absolute homelessness.

3.6.1 Street Gang Activity

Street gang activity is seen as a large problem for Winnipeg. Turf wars between the gangs are a growing concern. “In William Whyte, a gang will occupy an entire block of houses. They will use one house to sell drugs, one for prostitution, and one will sit empty in case another house is busted.”

Youth gang involvement was a common point of discussion. As one participant explained, “many Aboriginals are born into gang membership. It is like a family business in this sense, and there is an intimate relationship between the reserves and the city, connected by gangs, and drugs trafficked between the two locations.” Gang life is seen to be linked to both generational patterns of family problems and social marginalization: “these youth are not integrated, and many are marginalized by poverty as well, so their risk of becoming gang involved is high, because they do not have a lot of options.”

Street gangs were also linked to vandalism: “most of the vandalism in the West and North End is the work of 6 to 11 year olds. This is the target age of gang recruitment.”

3.6.2 Prostitution

One consultation participant argued that “visible street prostitution is only the tip of the iceberg. There are many young kids living in houses exchanging sex for food and shelter—survival sex.” As in other cities, the sexual exploitation of girls and women is reported to be tied to gang activity.

The sex trade is reported to be very visible in the North End, but less visible in the community of Spence, where prostitution takes place inside houses. The sexual exploitation of youth was a particular concern, and it was reported that Winnipeg is starting to see second generation sex trade workers. A 2007 *Globe and Mail* article stated that “girls as young as eight years of age are found selling sex on the streets or in crack houses” and that “the majority of girls working the street are under the age of 18” (Friesen, 2007). As with many street level social problems, the participants identified great concern with the number of youth involved in these activities.

One participant stated that “young girls are trafficked between houses in the North End and the West End. There are a number of gang houses in these areas, and this allows the gangs to respond quickly to police crackdowns, and evade discovery and arrest. Houses that are distributors of drugs operate on the same system.” It was argued that street prostitution can be safer than inside prostitution, and that police crackdowns on street prostitution can have unfortunate effects. “When there is a crackdown on street prostitution, the girls are displaced, and moved into unfamiliar neighbourhoods where they are more unsafe. It has often been the case that when this happens, the fallout is more women go missing, or end up dead.”

The general safety of children living in these communities is another concern, as children were being approached by johns on their way to school. This led to the implementation of the Safe Corridors to School program. This initiative identified the streets that children take to school and groups worked with the prostitutes to move them on to different streets or to limit their activity during the school commute times.

3.6.3 Homelessness

While homelessness did not emerge as strongly in Winnipeg as it did in other cities, it was still a concern for participants, with most identifying that it is more of a problem than five years ago. According to one participant, “homelessness and street homeless is a growing issue and is starting to become visible. The homeless population is coming from the Exchange District and downtown areas—Clean Sweep is pushing them out of the downtown core. Homelessness in Winnipeg is not very well resourced.”

Based on a shelter survey conducted in 2005, a total of 1,915 homeless persons were estimated to be staying in Winnipeg’s shelters (Proposed Fund Allocation Committee et al. 2005). Of the total, 1,370 were identified as adults and 540 were identified as youth (Proposed Fund Allocation Committee et al. 2005). In Winnipeg, the sheltered homeless are described as the visible homeless and make up only 20% of the total homeless population in the city (Proposed Fund Allocation Committee et al. 2005). Of particular interest is the growing number of youth accessing shelter services in Winnipeg.

As in Regina and Saskatoon, homelessness in Winnipeg is reported to be predominantly hidden and at risk homelessness characterized by couch-surfing, dilapidated, unsuitable housing, and crack houses. In the words of one participant, “people are not homeless, they are badly housed and living in slums.” The 2005 Report on Homelessness and Housing in Winnipeg defines this group of people as the invisible homeless, which is estimated to include as many as 7,600 people (Proposed Fund Allocation Committee et al. 2005). The invisible homeless were estimated to make up 80% of Winnipeg’s total homeless population.

There is a reported lack of affordable housing, including a lack of rental units and multifamily housing options, and participants argued that rising rental rates are pushing some individuals and families into homelessness. Two contributing factors identified were out-of-city rental property owners and gentrification. The lack of affordable housing is particularly a problem for marginalized families: “there are little or no options for those on low-incomes, on welfare, or who are new immigrants, and while people are continually moving in hopes of finding something better, inner city schools are seeing a high turnover rate.” In 2004, a total of 3,800 families were on the waiting list for social housing in Winnipeg (Proposed Fund Allocation Committee et al. 2005).

3.6.4 Street Drug Activity

Street drug activity was a common discussion point. It was reported that street drug activity is moving around the North End as activities are displaced from other areas. Street drug activity is present and wide-open in most neighbourhoods. As one participant stated, “suburban kids come into the North End to buy crack and take it to distribute in their schools.” Crack and crystal meth are thought to be the predominant street drugs in Winnipeg.

Crack houses are another issue, particularly for the communities of Dufferin, Lord Selkirk Park, William Whyte, North Point Douglas, and are moving in to Burrows and St. John’s. It was reported that while the neighbourhood of North Point Douglas started to clean up about five years ago, crack houses are now re-emerging.

3.6.5 Panhandling and Graffiti

Although panhandling was reported to be a favourite media topic in Winnipeg, consultation participants generally did not see this as a large issue.

It was noted that gang graffiti (“gang tags” used to mark turf) is a concern as it contributes to neighbourhood intimidation. Some participants noted that gang graffiti contributes to a lack of safety and fear of crime, both real and perceived. But, graffiti as a form of vandalism was viewed as different from gang tags and was not identified as a major concern by participants.

3.6.6 Other Issues

Violence was a common concern among Winnipeg participants. Violence in the city is reported to be escalating: “there are big gaps in the justice system when it comes to dealing with violence. Violent offenders are the most frequent returning offenders.” Another participant told us that “Winnipeg has a real problem with family violence that contributes to homelessness, addictions, and gang activity.”

3.7 Summary: The Current Situation in Western Canada

Street level social problems are present in each of the six cities under consideration and the overall sense among the individuals we consulted is that the problems are intensifying, becoming more complex, and spreading out. Although the situation in each city is unique, we heard a number of key similarities across the cities:

- **The problems are reported to be intensifying and becoming more complex.** In all six cities, it was stressed that the visible problems are only the “tip of the iceberg.”
- **The problems are reported to be concentrated in older inner city neighbourhoods, often on specific streets.** We heard that the problems often move from one street to another or from one neighbourhood to another. Participants also noted the spread of street level social problems into other parts of the cities.
- **Street drug activity is reported to be a large problem in each city and drugs were identified as an underlying cause of many of the other street level social issues.** Participants in each city have observed a change in the types of street drugs being used and argue that this is contributing to the increase in violence and aggressive behaviour on the streets.
- **Street prostitution, although identified as a problem in each city, is not identified as the greatest concern.** Street level prostitution is an example of the “tip of the iceberg” nature of these issues in that it reportedly represents only a small portion of the overall illegal sex trade.
- **Panhandling and graffiti are not reported to be critical issues for cities, particularly when compared to the issues of homelessness, prostitution, drugs, and gang activity.** In general, graffiti is seen to be more of an issue when it is associated with gang activity. However, many downtown and inner city businesses and some municipal government representatives were very concerned about these issues and the negative effects that they can have on certain areas of a city. Most of the cities included in this report have clean up initiatives to rid downtown areas of graffiti and other forms of vandalism.
- **Street level social problems are reported to be highly interconnected.** In addition, street level social problems are linked to broader issues such as a lack of affordable housing, poverty, unemployment, racism, and other forms of discrimination.
- **Youth are reported to be increasingly affected by street level social problems.** Participants expressed particular concern that prostitution, gang activity, drug activity, and homelessness are affecting more and more youth. A lack of services available to help youth was also noted.
- **Street level social problems are reported to affect a wide variety of social groups.** The people involved in street level social problems are not a homogenous group and include, for example, youth, seniors, and families. Aboriginal peoples were identified by participants as overrepresented in all street level social

problems. Participants in all six cities stressed the need for the public to remember that behind each of the problems are human beings each with their own stories, and that the homeless and sex trade workers are people, not just “problems,” and deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

There were also a few notable differences among the cities:

- ➔ **The visible nature of street level social problems is reported to be more evident in Vancouver, Calgary, and Edmonton.** Regina, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg all have visible street level social problems, but participants from Regina, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg noted that many of the problems in their cities take place behind closed doors.
- ➔ **The form and scope of homelessness varies between cities.** Absolute homelessness was identified as the greatest challenge in Vancouver, Calgary, and Edmonton. Absolute homelessness was seen to be a relatively smaller issue in Regina, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg. However, the hidden homeless and the at risk of being homeless (including those living in inadequate or poor quality housing) were identified as large issues in Regina, Saskatoon and Winnipeg.

4. Implications of Street Level Social Problems

Across the six cities, participants argued that street level social problems have numerous negative implications for individuals, communities, cities, and the country. The implications are reported to be far reaching and are not limited to the neighbourhoods where street level social problems are concentrated or to the people who live there.

4.1 Risk of social fragmentation

The potential for street level social problems to create or contribute to social stratification was mentioned time and time again. When asked about how street level social problems affect communities, participants cited social fragmentation and the potential for breakdown of community cohesion and social values as key concerns.

Many participants described the problem as “us versus them” and identified the growing socio-economic divisions in the cities:

- ➔ “Street level social problems polarize people and communities... Even if the polarization is not as entrenched in society as it is perceived to be, it is the perception that this has happened, which is very damaging.”
- ➔ “The broader community is starting to fracture and sequester ‘those people and their problems.’ This can add to the marginalization of neighbourhoods and people.”
- ➔ “Many people feel that these are inner city issues and that ‘as long as I don’t have to go there, then it doesn’t affect me.”
- ➔ “Communities such as ours are the areas of any city that put the people who are trying to survive with the addiction and mentally challenged together, because the other areas do not want to deal with the issues. Inmates that are released from prisons, including rapists and molesters, are unable to afford to live in other areas so they end up in the low income, condensed communities. By doing this, the higher income people can turn a blind eye until it gets closer to home. Until everyone (low and high income) starts to respect each other and work together, social problems are only going to get worse.”

Some participants argued that the “us versus them” mentality creates a vicious cycle that perpetuates the problems: “it results in suburban residents being unsupportive of inner city redevelopment—‘why should my taxpayer dollars go into those communities?’”

Many participants expressed concerns about the effect on public social values. A Calgary participant noted that “tolerance is decreasing” and a Vancouver participant reported that a “lack of empathy is growing.” The “us versus them” mentality is also associated with growing racism. According to one Saskatoon participant, how people perceive street level social problems “increases racism—especially toward Aboriginals.” As a result, “people and neighbourhoods are stigmatized.”

4.2 Generational cycles

Consultation participants spoke of the generational cycles present in street level social problems:

- ➡ “Problems are being passed down between generations.”
- ➡ “There is a generational perpetuation of the issues—the cycle continues because that is what people know.”
- ➡ “The relationship between gangs and prostitution and related crimes seriously threatens the cohesion of the neighbourhoods, and further exacerbates the socio-economic divide. This will continue to result in a breeding ground for crime that is already trans-generational with many kids knowing little sense of safety, security and hopefulness for the future...conditions for threats to safety of others by people who have little to lose.”

The inter-generational patterns were attributed to a loss of hope, social alienation, and socialization through gangs and the street. A Regina participant noted that “children who are born into gangs do not go to school, so their only socialization and education occurs through a gang.”

4.3 Threats to actual and perceived public safety

One of the most frequently mentioned implications of street level social problems is the negative impact on public safety—both actual safety and perceptions of safety:

- ➡ “People are afraid to be on bike paths in the parks, or let their children play in the park. They are afraid for their safety.”
- ➡ “Safety and security are major issues. People who work downtown feel unsafe going to work. People who use the downtown library feel unsafe and avoid going to that branch.”
- ➡ “Fear of safety in a community can limit transportation options. In some communities, there is a lack of buses to get around and residents have relied on walking. However, less and less people are walking because of fear of crime and safety.”

A number of participants noted that safety concerns are not just an issue for the general public, but also for the individuals living and working on the street. As one participant stated, “the homeless population has safety concerns as well. They too feel unsafe in the downtown. There are also families living in cars who do not feel safe, and those living in camps in the forested parks have safety concerns too.” Another participant reported that “homeless and at risk homeless often use public facilities during the day because they feel that this is a safe environment—from the cold and from other street people.”

4.4 Public health concerns

Street level social problems can have negative public health effects. As one participant noted, “there are health implications, such as the pneumonia outbreak in the DTES in winter 2005, and the economic costs that accompany health issues.” The spread of diseases like pneumonia, HIV and hepatitis C were of particular concern, and it was argued that these diseases are not isolated to the most challenged communities.

At a broader scale, many participants noted that inadequate and poor quality housing is linked to poor health outcomes at the neighbourhood level. Using 2001 Census data, a study found that low income neighbourhoods in Saskatoon had significant differences in health care utilization, suicide attempts, mental disorders, injuries and poisonings, diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, coronary heart disease, chlamydia, gonorrhoea, hepatitis C, teen pregnancy, low birth weight, infant mortality, and all-cause mortality (Lemstra et al. 2006). The neighbourhoods where street level social problems are concentrated are at greater risk for poor health outcomes, which can have generational effects.

4.5 Higher long-term government costs

The high cost of street level social problems to government services—and ultimately taxpayers—was mentioned frequently by study participants. The government service costs mentioned were attributed to higher usage of policing, ambulance/EMS, health care, the criminal justice system, and other services:

- ➔ “Street level social problems cost us an enormous amount of public dollars to address—from emergency shelters to policing and jails to emergency room visits. All these expenditures do is manage the problems. Street level social problems represent a hugely inefficient use of public funds.”
- ➔ “Health care costs are rising. The drugs on the street today are cheap, highly addictive, and readily available, which is creating health problems. Street level social problems are an increasing drain on our social infrastructure and police resources. Costs are increasing.”
- ➔ “Regular neighbourhood resources are cannibalized by high impact individuals...other residents lose out as program resources now become used not to buy more basketballs, but to install cameras, alarm systems, or hire safety patrols.”
- ➔ “The other needs and priorities of community members fall by the wayside as the vast majority of resources are concentrated on dealing with drug-related problems.”

One participant argued that “emergency services are very costly versus the costs of prevention. It costs a lot for emergency services where it would be less to house a person and give them the services that they need.” Another asserted that, “the cost of operating shelters far exceeds the cost of providing affordable housing.”

Some participants suggested that projecting costs into the future could serve as a motivating factor for governments and communities to address street level social problems. As one participant stated, “You cannot afford not to do something about this.”

4.6 Business costs

One of the broader implications of street level social problems is the negative effects on the business community. A number of negative business impacts were reported:

- ➔ Loss of customers: “Panhandling scares people and makes them feel uncomfortable in the downtown. People are avoiding coming downtown and shopping because they are afraid.”
- ➔ Business security: “Private security guards are being hired to guard businesses in the areas of Robson, Gastown and Chinatown. This has an economic cost to business owners.”
- ➔ Labour: “If there is no affordable housing, low income workers will not be able to survive here, and the result will be a labour shortage.”
- ➔ Event attraction: “It is impacting business and the broader community. The Trade and Convention Centre is unable to attract conventions because of the problems in Vancouver.”
- ➔ Business disengagement: “Businesses on 20th Street are disinvesting in the broader community and have become jaded. They are very difficult to get out to community clean ups or other community initiatives.”
- ➔ Development: “Developers are hesitant to invest because of visible social problems.”

4.7 City image

In the electronic survey, three-quarters of the respondents stated that street level social problems have a moderate to large negative impact on city image and tourism. This concern was not mentioned often at the consultations, although participants did mention that labels such as “crime capital” or “murder capital” did little to bolster community pride or reputation.

4.8 Potential for escalation and geographic spread of problems

Participants argued that street level social problems will escalate in terms of the number of individuals affected and the severity of the problems they face. For example, one participant argued that “mental health will be more of a problem in the future if drug use among youth is not dealt with today.” It was also argued that there is potential for the problems to spread to other communities.

4.9 Potential for community building and empowerment

While almost all of the implications described by participants were negative, there were a number who saw a silver lining in the dark clouds, stating that street level social problems create the room and opportunity for communities to pull together and help those in need and improve their neighbourhoods. One participant stated that “people care and the problems empower residents to become involved.” Another argued that “people want to dig in their heels and make a difference.” This perspective was also put forward by a Winnipeg participant who noted that “residents want to get involved and help with their communities. Resident associations are growing and new residents to the area want to make a difference.” In Regina, many of the people working and living in North Central are proud of their community and the positive changes that are taking place there.

Throughout the consultation process, the research team was struck by the community pride that was evident in each city and in the neighbourhoods where street level social problems are concentrated. The participants were, of course, aware of the challenges they face, but had very strong community ties and believed in the importance of investing in their neighbourhoods and the residents who live there.

5. Conclusion

The feedback from the frontlines presented in this report highlights the complexity of the street level social problems found in western Canadian cities. These street level challenges are often symptoms of even more complex social issues such as poverty, racism, abuse, and economic dislocation.

One of the most difficult challenges facing policy-makers is deciding how to address the tension between two competing approaches to address street level social problems. There are those who believe that the focus should be on helping people in need—the homeless, the addicted, the mentally ill—and there are those who believe that the focus should be on cleaning up the streets by cracking down on drug dealers, pimps, and gangs.

Do we fix broken windows or broken lives? The answer is that we must do both. There is room for public policy to accommodate both approaches. Future reports in the *Core Challenges Initiative* series will examine positive options for doing so. ■

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