

The Province

Property crime's 'Ground Zero'; That's the Downtown Eastside's status, police say, and it's an under-reported problem

Mon Jun 1 2009

Page: A7

Section: News

Byline: Elaine O'Connor

Source: The Province

Illustrations: Chart/Graph: Crime in the Downtown Eastside as a percentage of total crime in Vancouver from January 2008 to October 2008

Chart/Graph: The five-year trend The Downtown Eastside straddles two Vancouver Police Department districts, but most of it falls into the Strathcona district. Here's an examination of crime incidents in that district:

Colour Photo: Jason Payne, The Province, file / A drug-related shootout at the Downtown Eastside's New Wings Hotel in 2005 left two men dead.

Vancouver police Sgt. Toby Hinton is walking the beat on a chilly night, blowing on his knuckles. "I don't like hands in pockets," says the 20-year veteran Downtown Eastside Beat Enforcement Team officer. "You're pretty vulnerable." There's no shortage of potential conflict. Police lights flash as officers handcuff a man on the sidewalk. Around him, residents rush out of buildings, slamming doors and yelling at each other. Two men argue. Three young men loiter on a street corner. Hinton asks them, "You haven't seen any suspicious-looking guys around here, have you?" Down the alleys, drug users skitter away as they see him coming. "I'm not doing anything, officer. I'm going to InSite," says a man who was preparing his needle.

Hinton's police radio crackles: there's an unconscious woman on the street, possibly a heroin overdose, and a man who's been stabbed with a needle. Sirens wail. Just another night in Vancouver's drug and crime epicentre.

"There are a lot of predatory types down here. Predatory drug dealers profiting from misery, unscrupulous slum landlords, totally corrupt businesses. A lot of people are self-medicating and living miserable existences. They aren't bad people, but some are very criminal-minded, chronic, super-chronic offenders and sex offenders," he says.

"There is a lot of nasty stuff that happens down here after dark." - If that's the reality of life in the Downtown Eastside, the crime statistics underplay it. They say that crime here has been fairly constant over the past six years, though property crimes and prostitution are down, assaults and mischief are up.

"There's a lot of under-reporting of crime down here," Hinton explains. "I know assaults and violent crime are under-reported. There's a lot of fear of intimidation and retaliation, and lack of co-operation from victims and witnesses in dealing with violent crime, because these guys have to come out and see the same dealer.

"As far as property crime and theft from autos, I would hazard a guess people aren't reporting getting their vehicles tapped into if they have a \$300 deductible. I've had it happen to me where I haven't reported it." Chronic offenders are a plague across the city, tying up police resources with endless petty crime and earning Vancouver the title of worst

Canadian city for property crime. In 2008, property crimes accounted for 69 per cent of all crimes committed in the city. Most of those offences are committed by repeat offenders with addictions or mental illnesses: one study found that 74 per cent of Downtown Eastside addicts had criminal records.

In a report, Vancouver police calculated that, of 379 offenders, 100 had more than 54 criminal convictions each; 40 had more than 77 and six had more than 100 convictions. Shockingly, they found that after an offender had been convicted 30 times, sentences would get shorter.

"They're like automatons: 'Must break in, must break in, must break in.' If you get one chronic offender from here in jail, it has a huge effect on the crime rate," Hinton says.

Vancouver's subsidized single-room-occupancy hotels, or SROs, are another major crime generator. A 2007 Vancouver Agreement report showed that for every dollar spent on housing in 20 problem SROs, 95 cents were spent on emergency calls. Of 614 ambulance calls at the Roosevelt Hotel, for example, 88 were for assault.

To meet the demand for service, Vancouver police want more officers. "We have always maintained that more police equals less crime," Chief Const. Jim Chu wrote in the force's 2007 report.

In 2008 and 2009, the force is deploying 96 new officers. But more officers come at a cost. Staffing expenses increased eight per cent to \$144,970,000 from 2006 to 2007.

- Of the factors that complicate policing in the Downtown Eastside, mental illness among residents has proven the most complicated.

According to a 2008 Vancouver police report, Lost in Transition, of 1,154 calls for police service over two weeks, 31 per cent involved a mentally ill person. In 2007 alone, police spent 13,000 hours on such cases. When police are the first responders, offenders are taken to jail.

"Without question, our members criminalize people who are mentally ill. That is a reality," says report author Det. Const. Fiona Wilson-Bates. "Our members are expected to deal with them without

services. They can take them to hospital, but to get them admitted, the bar is exceptionally high. So they can only take them to jail." Bates spent four years in the Downtown Eastside. At first, she thought drugs were at the root, but found mental illness to be the true scourge.

"Often people ask, what came first, drug abuse or mental illness? What I heard from friends and family was it was mental illness that first drew people to the area. Once they are there, they are vulnerable to drugs." The result of a lack of services for the mentally ill is dire: half of all fatal shootings by Vancouver police since 1980 involved the mentally ill. "This," the report states, "is the most tragic and extreme manifestation of a mental-health system that is failing." And of a law enforcement system struggling to turn the tide.

- Meanwhile, law-abiding citizens continue to pay the price for Downtown Eastside crime. Addicts spread property crime to other parts of the city as they steal to make quick cash to score.

In the early 2000s, neighbourhoods such as Kitsilano, Commercial Drive, the West End and the downtown Vancouver core reported spikes in car and home break-ins. There were 7,000 car break-ins in the downtown peninsula in 2002 alone.

The Vancouver Board of Trade estimated in 2005 that property crime was costing Vancouverites \$125 million a year. Following a crackdown, property crime rates have fallen, but in the Eastside, where many chronic offenders live, break-and-enters remain high.

"We call the Downtown Eastside Ground Zero for property crime. Most of the chronic offenders live there and they commit crimes in concentric rings, into Fairview, Mount Pleasant, Kitsilano and Shaughnessy, and they certainly like to take the Main Street bus and the SkyTrain to Metrotown," says Chu.

Vancouver Board of Trade economist emeritus Dave Park studies property crime and says though reported crimes may be down, it doesn't mean actual crime is down. Insurers, he says, are reporting a higher cost per theft.

"We're talking about huge amounts here. There is a real frustration on the part of the public that they have to endure this. It all goes back to illegal drugs. [Vancouver police] calculations showed an addict needs \$100 a day to purchase drugs, but with property theft they could get just 10 cents on the dollar. So it could be a thousand dollars a day in property they had to steal. There is a huge loss to society." Back in the Downtown Eastside, crime continues to scare stores away, halting any chance that sustained business growth could turn the area around. The absence of legitimate businesses adds to the "broken windows" effect.

By 2001, the storefront vacancy rate on Main Street between Hastings and Cambie was 43 per cent. In 2007, 29 per cent of stores along Hastings Street

between Richards and Gore sat empty. The lack of commerce encourages the open drug market, street disorder and crime that scare off stores and shoppers. It's an endless cycle: more crime means less business means more crime.

The 2009 Vancouver police report, Project Lockstep: A United Effort to Save Lives in the Downtown Eastside, makes clear the cycle is hard to break.

Violent crime has always been prevalent in the area. In 1960, the report says, 34 per cent of all homicides and aggravated assaults, 33 per cent of robberies, 66 per cent of public drunkenness and 10 per cent of sexual assaults in Vancouver happened in the Downtown Eastside.

Fast forward 50 years and little has changed. In 2008, the area accounted for 34.5 per cent of serious assaults, six per cent of homicides, 22 per cent of robberies, 19 per cent of public drunkenness and 16 per cent of sexual assaults.

As a result, the report concludes that the Downtown Eastside, with its surfeit of mental illness, addiction, poverty, homelessness, illegitimate businesses, crime, public disorder and sex-trade activity, has become "an efficient, though self-defeating, system where a synergistic underground economy fuels drug use and criminal behaviour and provides little incentive or encouragement for people to leave and improve their lives." eoconnor@theprovince.com

II Coming up

Tomorrow: Chronic offender Kenny Lam's last sliver of hope

Wednesday:

Province columnist Ethan Baron and photographer Arlen Redekop spend a night on the streets

Thursday:

A veteran defence lawyer argues the case for change on the Downtown Eastside.

Plus: Our Unsung Hero and your feedback.