

Factsheet about Street Sweeps & Theft by Surrey RCMP & Bylaw

In early 2020, the Whalley Street Council, a group of unhoused and underhoused community leaders, launched a community research project to gather information about homeless people's experiences with police and bylaw officers in Surrey.

As of March 4th, 2021, we have collected a total of 40 survey responses. This factsheet represents our preliminary findings in an ongoing research project that will result in a report to be released in late-Spring.

Demographics

13 respondents (32%) were Indigenous, which is roughly consistent with the percentage of Indigenous people on the streets of Surrey. Most respondents were on disability (16) or welfare (10); others were on pension (3) or worked odd jobs.

One respondent had been homeless for 6 months; all other respondents had been homeless for more than one year, with 7 respondents experiencing homelessness for more than 10 years. 17 respondents lived outside, 12 in shelters, 12 in modular or supportive housing, 6 in market rental housing, and others lived in vehicles or couch surfed. A number of respondents selected multiple answers regarding where they lived.

Displacement

39 out of 40 respondents reported experiencing being "moved along" by police (35), bylaw officers (35), private security (24), or members of the public (15).

Seizure of belongings

34 respondents have had belongings taken by police (31), bylaw officers (30), private security (7), or outreach/shelter/social workers (7). These incidents occurred in parks (20), street (26), storefronts (13), and the bushes (6).

The majority of respondents reported having their belongings seized on multiple occasions. 9 reported having belongings seized "too many times to count." 2 reported having belongings seized 11-25 times; 7 reported 5-10 times; 9 reported 2-4 times; and 1 respondent reported having belongings seized only once. Others gave answers such as "plenty" or "numerous times."

Respondents reported having the following items seized: tents (31), bedding (31), clothes (31), money (29), identification (26), medication (25), keepsakes (32), bikes (3), work tools (2), food (2), jewellery (1), family photographs (1), family members' ashes (1), and "everything" (3). Respondents also said they lost their "humanity" and "freedom."

Respondents received no explanation (28) or verbal explanations (10). Verbal explanations included comments such as: your stuff is garbage/trash (3), you are not moving fast enough (2), you have too much stuff (2). No one reported receiving a written explanation.

3 respondents were told their belongings would be taken to a property office or warehouse, but in each case the respondent was not able to retrieve their belongings. They explained:

- "I went to City Hall but they had no idea what I was talking about."
- "I was given the run around and never got anything back."
- "When I followed up with the Bylaw office they said they didn't have my things."

Interrupted income

26 respondents reported being prevented from earning an income by police (25), bylaw officers (17), and private security (11), including from: collecting recyclables or scraps (10), panhandling (11), binning (8), sex work (5), selling drugs (10), and busking (1).

Assault

27 respondents reported being assaulted by police, 10 by bylaw officers, and 10 by private security.

Additional comments

- "I am tired of being asked to stop being. I currently cannot just sit somewhere in public if I have anything of value."
- "I didn't have much to start with and they kept taking it away."
- "I'm scared of the police because they are ruthless and rude."
- "They really broke us down. It's degrading."
- "I am Deaf. Bylaw keeps harassing me without an interpreter. Bylaw steals my valuable stuff."
- "Police and bylaw are not in our situation, so they believe in killing off us poor and homeless people. Watching us freeze in the winter and actually laughing at our stolen belongings such as shelter, heat, and food."
- "I have witnessed bylaw taking and throwing people's belongings in the back of a garbage truck just because they were not moving fast enough. At least 10 times."