



Homeless in Montréal 3,000 and counting

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A few weeks ago the report on the number of homeless people in Montreal was released revealing that the number of persons without a place to live amounts to 3,016. That was the number of people counted on the night of March 24 by a group of 600 volunteers who searched streets, parks, alleys, visited shelters and other places where people who don't have a home may stay. The job performed by these volunteers faced great obstacles and challenges, and regardless of the figures they found, what is important is to have at least some initial data to start discussing the problem.

The initiative to undertake this informal census of the homeless should be credited to Mayor Denis Coderre who in September last year unveiled a three-year plan to deal with this issue. The figures revealed by this counting are more accurate than a previous attempt to calculate the number of homeless people conducted in 1998 which came with a far greater number: 30,000.

The apparently more manageable number however must not make people fall into complacency; homelessness is still a serious and growing problem in Montreal, and it is important that the different levels of government pay some serious attention to it.

The numbers revealed by the counting are also just a beginning in what is the long process of taking these people off the streets and into a better life. For one thing, a counting is simply a quantitative type of data, the big problem should now be finding the qualitative information on this complex issue, that is, why this people are on the streets, who are they in terms of their state of health, physical and mental, what is their educational level, how able they may be to undertake a change in their lives via job training for instance, how willing—some of them—may be to change a lifestyle of drug or alcohol abuse, and so on. Only knowing this more complex set of qualitative information we as society may try to solve the problem.

Certainly there are no easy solutions to the problem of homelessness: practically all western societies face this situation

in their big cities. This is why in our case we should be able to learn from other experiences

and policies were disguised as new, more enlightened views on the treatment of these illness, the idea that



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as well as to develop our own. There is no question that the issue of homelessness cannot be separated from policies developed by governments in the past that led to literally dump people on the streets: cuts to health care led to the closing of many facilities in mental institutions, and as we know many of the homeless are indeed people with various degrees of mental disease, mostly harmless but still unable for their condition to interact in a normal setting. Sometimes these brutal

many or most mentally ill patients didn't need to be institutionalized— which could be true, but lacking enough resources those patients were released without adequate follow-up and lacking any other support they ended up on the streets. Many other people now on the streets simply ended up like that after losing their jobs.

It is also necessary to go beyond the band-aid solutions that some people perhaps with good intention but with little reasoning put forward, such as

allowing homeless people to sleep in metro stations especially in the winter. This is a typical superficial approach to a complex problem and it seems that it has already been adopted by transit authorities since there are stations especially Guy-Concordia, Atwater, McGill and Place des Arts that in fact are being used as sleeping quarters by some or at least as a site for hanging out. Perhaps those who see this practice as normal haven't thought the inherent indignity that for a human being is to sleep in a public space that on the other hand is not equipped to deal with issues of hygiene and the minimum comfort a person must have.

A policy on homelessness must set as a priority in the long term the availability of social or affordable housing, in the meantime the number of beds in shelters must be doubled or tripled. The notion of shelter itself should be revisited: depending on the availability of space in the same premises or in other nearby establishments, the residents of shelters should be given the opportunity to undergo training with the aim of acquiring some marketable skills, those in

need of drug or alcohol rehabilitation should be given that treatment as well, and of course those with mental disorders should be placed under adequate care.

Although the initiative taken by Mayor Coderre is a valuable one, the scope of the problem exceeds the capabilities of a municipal administration and therefore the participation of the provincial and federal governments is indispensable if a comprehensive and national policy on the growing problem of homelessness is going to be designed and implemented. After all, this is a problem created mainly by government policies based on the notion of reducing public services, lowering taxes for corporations, and introducing the deceitful ideology of austerity. We are all suffering because of those policies, but of course the poorer ones are suffering the most. And the homeless are the bottom of the ladder.

For those in the downtown area interested in the subject the Peter McGill Community Council is organizing a new forum on it for September 15.