



The Christian Science Monitor - CSMonitor.com

2010 Winter Olympics Opening Ceremony: What about Vancouver's homeless?

As long as the Olympics change locations, ill-equipped cities like Vancouver will make cosmetic preparations that only exacerbate local issues.

By [Taraneh Ghajar Jerven](#)

posted February 12, 2010 at 12:20 pm EST

Vancouver, British Columbia —

Vancouver residents are not cynics or zealots. But do not be surprised if there are more protesters than athletes at the Olympics Opening Ceremony. The Olympics have a history of leaving host cities in debt, and relocating the poor and homeless away from the sanitized corridors of host cities. Vancouver is no exception.

The city initially put the public cost of hosting the Olympics at \$660 million. It has exceeded that by \$5 billion in unanticipated public spending, when the government bailed out the Vancouver Olympic Organizing Committee (VANOC), which went bankrupt during the global financial turmoil.

Due to the government's unanticipated Olympic spending, Vancouver's most basic public programs will have to scabble for funding in the coming years. The already neglected programs to address housing and homelessness won't make the government's agenda at all.

For both Atlanta in 1996 and Sydney in 2000, the solution to visible homelessness was forcibly removing citizens from tourist areas during the Games.

Vancouver's marginalization of the lower income citizens, however, began well before 2010. The homeless population in Vancouver has doubled since the city won the bid in 2003, as

residents were squeezed out of low-income housing during the Olympic real estate boom and gentrification.

Then in December 2009, British Columbia, Vancouver's province, passed the Assistance to Shelter Act allowing police officers to use compulsion to remove the homeless from public areas. Because the law has no local precedent, the timing sparked a heated debate about the government's policy toward the homeless during the Olympics.

The reaction was so strong that Jim Chu, the Vancouver police chief constable, made an independent statement to the press that his officers would not uphold the legislation.

Chu's force, however, is a small portion of the Olympics security, which has cost \$900 million – that's \$240 million over the estimated total public cost of Olympic preparation.

Host cities consistently anticipate that the Olympics will deliver long term positive effects that do not materialize. In light of these botched scenarios, which have significant social and fiscal costs, perhaps it's time to lay a faulty model to rest.

As long as the Olympics change locations, ill-equipped cities with the best intentions will make cosmetic preparations that exacerbate local issues without adding any positive legacy. Developers will get richer and local governments poorer. In fact, the notoriously negative effects of hosting are referred to among economists as "the host city curse."

In Vancouver the Olympics aggravated a housing crisis. Homelessness is so prevalent that 57 percent of local residents voted it as their priority to address when the city won the Olympic bid.

Canada, the only Group of Eight member lacking a national housing strategy, has 300,000 homeless – with disproportionately high numbers of aboriginal Canadians who have a homelessness rate 15 times greater than the rest of the population. In British Columbia there are 15,000 homeless. Downtown Vancouver contains the poorest region in all of Canada.

Vancouver's local residential real estate market has an extremely low vacancy rate – and there is almost no low-income housing. According to TRAC, a nonprofit education center for tenants and landlords, 900,000 individuals in British Columbia are labelled "at risk" of homelessness, spending more than one third of their paychecks on rent. Should they miss a paycheck, they will be out on the streets.

Because of this pressing dilemma, community organizations met with the VANOC and agreed on the urgent need to build affordable housing before the Olympics. But this did not occur. As VANOC went bankrupt and the government stepped in, assuming billions in debt, low-income housing was nixed.

When investment banks act irresponsibly, causing the loss of billions of taxpayer dollars, we make new regulations to ensure they act responsibly. The Olympic industry is a similarly oversized dinosaur, with host city taxpayers footing the bill for the bailout and receiving a lower quality of life in return.

Recent examples of massively indebted host cities include Sydney, Australia; Barcelona, Spain; and Athens, who are still paying off debt taken on to finance the games. In 2004

Athens spent \$12 billion on hosting, 5 percent of Greece's gross domestic product. Beijing beat all previous records, not only blowing \$40 billion on Games readiness, but also evicting from 6,700 to 1.5 million people from housing in real estate development areas, depending on whom you ask.

In Vancouver, 69 percent of residents agree that way too much was spent on the games. The protesters are out and will keep on coming. There have been Poverty Olympics, with a bedbug as a mascot, and the homeless enthusiastically participating in spoof sports. Numerous organizations, including the Olympic

Resistance Network, 2010 Watch, and No 2010 will all demonstrate. Pivot Legal Society's Red Tent Campaign will place red tents throughout the downtown event areas that will shelter the homeless, emblazoned with statements like "Housing is a right."

The Olympics do bring the world together. The spirit of the Games and the prowess of the athletes are not in question. What is in question is the structure of the

Olympic industry, which is based on moving the Olympics around the world. No host city has ever made a profit, according to Robert Barney, director of the International Centre for Olympic Studies at the University of Western Ontario. Few host cities feel their investment justifies the human or fiscal costs.

The simple solution to the "host city curse" is to locate the Olympics in the same place and keep it there. It's time to assess how the local impact of the Olympics detracts from the ultimate message of the Olympics – that of global understanding.

Taraneh Ghajar Jerven is a Vancouver resident and a freelance writer. She holds a masters degree in Economic History from London School of Economics. A former event producer, she spent two years planning and running financial conferences throughout Europe.

Did this essay make you think? Join the conversation on [Facebook!](#)



enjoy free shipping and free returns
on spring's new arrivals. [Shop now](#)

PIPERLIME

© The Christian Science Monitor. All Rights Reserved. [Terms](#) under which this service is provided to you. [Privacy Policy](#).