

Almost everyone who heard I was going to visit Vancouver's downtown eastside was mildly horrified. "Why are you going there on your vacation?" most asked. "I want you to be really careful. *Seriously*," said one friend, an RCMP officer. Few understood the invisible forces pulling me to the area, asking me to bear witness to the home of countless people struggling with drug addiction and poverty, [Insite](#), [the Odd Squad](#) and many of [the women murdered by Robert Pickton](#).

I took the bus to the downtown eastside, travelling past Stanley Park and through the fashionable shopping areas of Robson Street and Gastown. As I got closer and closer to the police station where I was to meet my tour guides - officers with the Vancouver Police Department's Beat Enforcement Team - the atmosphere shifted. The buildings got shabbier and shabbier and the colour drained away from everything. And then, *BOOM*, East Hastings and the downtown eastside roared up around me. I was in the middle of the neighbourhood I'd seen many times on the evening news, almost always in connection with drugs or violence.

Vancouver's downtown eastside is a small area - only about ten city blocks - but it is packed with people struggling with serious drug addictions, living in alleyways and selling battered paperback books and electronics equipment off of tattered blankets on the side of the street. As I walked around with the police officers who are patrolling the area, they told me about the things they have seen. Some are not fans of Insite, North America's one and only legal supervised injection site. The officers admit that they've seen a drop in the number of people shooting up on the streets, but they point out that people are still shooting up in great numbers. They think treatment should be mandatory for users of Insite. Other officers told me of the people they see everyday and the street bosses who control the drug trade, block by block. I heard about the latest murder investigation they closed.

As we walked, the crowd parted like waves before us. The officers were constantly on the watch, looking for suspicious activity and signs of trouble. They stopped and searched many people, giving some tickets for street vending without a license and having open alcohol in public, charging others for the possession of drugs. Almost every person searched was carrying drug paraphernalia - crack pipes stuffed at the bottom of a purse and used needles tucked inside a sock one man was wearing ("it's so I remember I already used them and have to throw them out," he explained). A few carried knives, tucked into cargo pockets and the waistbands of pants.

As the officers stopped to issue someone a ticket, I caught sight of a woman on her hands and knees on the ground, digging between the sidewalk cracks with a straw. She never looked up at us, but occasionally leaned forward to snort whatever she found between the cracks up into her nose. Her whole body shook with the power of her high, and she wore no shoes.

The men in Pigeon Park - a dismal street corner with sparse bushes and a few park benches - were all drunk. A huge, empty bottle of mouthwash lay on the ground between them. "They drink mouthwash and rubbing alcohol to get drunk," one of the officers explained to me. If people have reached the level of addiction where they will consume these things, I can't help but wonder if the problems that led them to this state are beyond what most of us can imagine coping with.

When I asked them about the people they see in the downtown eastside, the officers told me it's the hardest to see the youth, and they see plenty of them. "When you get kids coming to live here, it's pretty much too late. They're gone," they said, a new layer of sadness added to their voices. When I drove through the area again much later with a friend, he could only shake his head. "Welcome to the land of the lost," he said quietly as we stared at the bruised and shaking people, tucked between dumpsters and in doorstops.

I'm no stranger to the face of human tragedy: I've worked for years in a courthouse with people who are at the very lowest points of their lives. I've heard so many things that have broken my heart, and witnessed so much courage that I've wanted to cry with relief and joy. If nothing else, I believe in the perseverance of the human spirit. There were many moments in Vancouver's downtown eastside where I almost lost that faith, but each time, I'd catch something good: a soup kitchen with smiling volunteers, a group of high school students passing out sandwiches to those on the streets, police officers remembering and asking after the sick friend of a person they regularly run into. My experience that day has reinforced my conviction that crime prevention and social development are some of the most important things we must do. As for the people of the land of the lost? What is lost can always be found and there are so many good and kind people helping search.

Links

[Insite](#)

[Missing Lives, a Special Report from the Canadian Press](#)

[The Odd Squad](#)