



BRITISH COLUMBIA
ASSEMBLY OF FIRST NATIONS

Experiences With Bylaw in Prince George



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On August 30, 2021, the City of Prince George (CPG) adopted the Safe Streets Bylaw No. 9209, 2021 (Bylaw) with the intent to “help make the streets, sidewalks, and alleys of Prince George safer for all residents.” According to the City, “the overall purpose of bylaw enforcement is to gain voluntary compliance, not to criminalize,¹” which Mayor Lyn Hall described as “educational².” Further, Councillor Kyle Sampson acknowledged that “there is a process to retract a bylaw if it's not working.”³

Due to the ongoing legacies of Canada’s residential school system, land dispossession, and other colonial policies, a disproportionate number of housing insecure individuals across BC are First Nations. Furthermore, the chronic lack of housing and infrastructure in First Nations communities is linked to homelessness in municipalities such as Prince George. As such, the housing crisis is a top priority for the BC Assembly of First Nations (BCAFN). Per BCAFN Resolution 08/2020⁴ and Articles 3, 21, 23, and 24 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples⁵, BCAFN membership maintains that there is an urgent need to address homelessness for First Nations both on and off reserve.

Approximately six months after Bylaw implementation, the BCAFN commissioned exploratory research to document the experiences of de-housed and precariously housed citizens under the Bylaw. Between March 8-11, 2022, a team of six researchers (three Indigenous and three non-Indigenous) conducted 13 semi-structured interviews in Bylaw “hotspots” (Appendix A) to be recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Respondent demographics reflected Prince George’s recent Point-in-Time homelessness report, comprising 46% women and 70% Indigenous.

Based on respondent experiences, the Safe Streets Bylaw causes Prince George’s streets, sidewalks, and alleys to be less safe for de-housed and precariously housed citizens. The Bylaw is leveraged to shield the housed public from visible poverty. Moreover, Bylaw enforcement threatens citizens’ survival, and women are at greater risk of harassment. The City of Prince George has not provided adequate education to the public on the Bylaw and instead employs

¹ City of Prince George email and press release, September 1, 2022 (Appendix 2)

² <https://www.pressreader.com/canada/the-prince-george-citizen/20211216/281487869661474>

³ City of Prince George Council Meeting, August 30, 2022, timestamp approx. 1:39:09
<https://princegeorgebc.new.swagit.com/videos/136254>.

⁴ British Columbia Assembly of First Nations Resolution 08/2022, March 4, 2022
https://www.bcafn.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/resolutions/2020_08_SCA_ActionPlanforFirstNationsHomelessnessOnandOffReserve.pdf

⁵ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, September 13, 2007
https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf



inhumane and discriminatory tactics to achieve “voluntary” compliance. The Bylaw’s cost is imposed upon individuals, shelters, and government services, such as the First Nations Health Authority, Northern Health, and the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC).

There are Five Key Findings:

- A. The Safe Streets Bylaw jeopardizes the safety of Prince George citizens.
- B. Bylaw enforcement is discriminatory; women and people who ‘look’ low-income are at greater risk of harassment.
- C. The Bylaw is creating financial burden on individuals, the City of Prince George (CPG), and the Province of BC.
- D. CPG has not provided adequate Bylaw education, making citizens vulnerable to “beyond bylaw” mistreatment.
- E. Bylaw funding could be allocated more effectively to make Prince George safer, cleaner, and more inclusive.

BYLAW JEOPARDIZES THE SAFETY OF PRINCE GEORGE CITIZENS

The Safe Streets Bylaw utilizes **inhumane and unsafe harassment tactics** to drive visible poverty out of certain areas of Prince George.

- Not a single respondent stated that the Bylaw makes them feel safer.
 - 40% said that they feel less safe with the Bylaw.
- In Prince George, winter weather is life-threatening; however, almost all alcoves that provide protection from the elements have been “caged” or closed. Though there are inadequate shelters and daytime facilities, 100% of respondents said the Bylaw has removed them from wind shelters, tents, and relative warmth.
 - Every single respondent shared that bylaw officers have confiscated tents, blankets, heaters, and camping stoves, regardless of the temperature.
 - **These actions are not conducive to citizens’ safety or wellbeing.**
- James⁶, 24: “Last night they took away my heater and now I have frostbite.”
- Linda, 42: “I’ve had a tarp taken away by bylaw officers because it was too big or too unsightly or whatever. The tarp was keeping myself and a couple friends warm. We had already taken it down and they decided to take it and throw it away. Because that’s what bylaw does. They throw everything you own away over and over and over again.”

⁶ To protect respondents’ identities, all names in this report have been changed.



- Jane, 25: “I got like a little mini fire [portable, propane campfire] for myself so I wasn't so cold cause this past week, it's been freezing, but they took it away. Like me and my husband have been crying every morning because we're so cold.”

The Bylaw directly **exacerbates the poisoned drug crisis** by removing and disposing of harm reduction supplies, pushing citizens to use potentially lethal drugs without life-saving supports.

- 62% said the Bylaw makes it harder to do drugs more safely.
- 100% of women said bylaw officers had removed their harm reduction supplies.
- Patricia, 59, said the Bylaw “really affects” the drug crisis as it forces people to use drugs alone. She explained that “they have to go somewhere and hide and then they're by themselves and then they're dead because there's no one to Narcan them.”
- Linda, 42: “I'll try to use around other people because the drug supply is so tainted, but the bylaw officers don't like you standing in groups, they break up groups, so you hide your drug use from bylaw. You go under stuff where no one can see you. Unfortunately, that's how a lot of people die.”

The Safe Streets Bylaw makes life harder for citizens of Prince George.

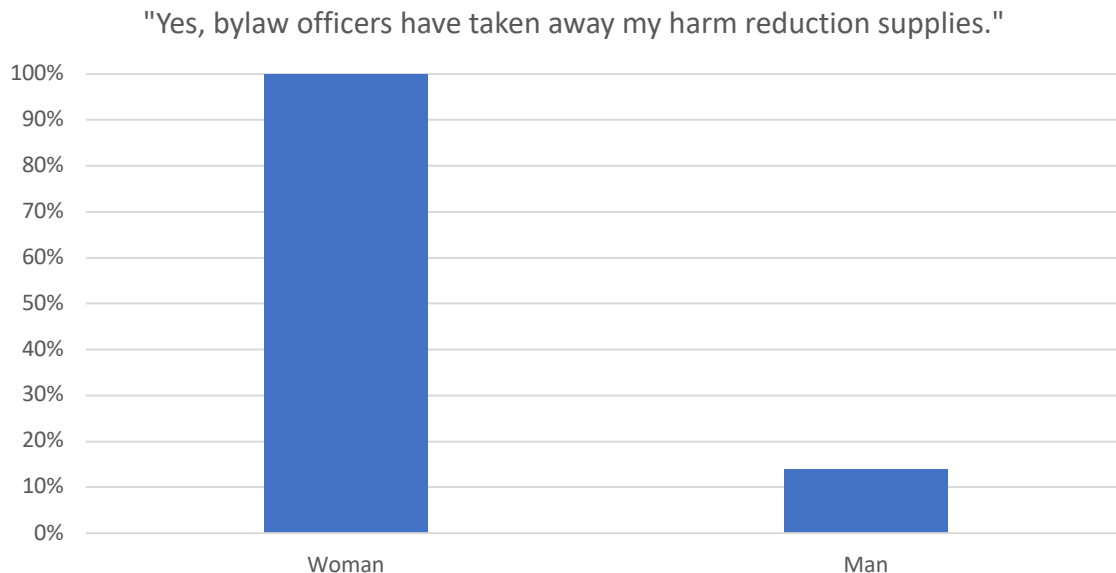
- 100% said the Bylaw makes it harder to store their belongings.
- 70% said the Bylaw makes it harder to conserve energy due to constant movement.
- 30% said the Bylaw makes it harder for them to access services.
 - Sam, 49: “They've never helped me to access services.”
 - Patricia, 59: “It's hard to carry my stuff around, especially when I'm sick. I got a kidney infection from when it was so cold.”
 - Mary, 35: “I've had my sternum broken twice so I can't carry anything heavier than 10 pounds, or it can get re-broken. I'm not supposed to carry anything over 10 pounds” but she moves her belongings continuously, so they are not confiscated.
 - Linda, 42: “I couldn't keep carrying it all from place to place. It's too heavy and you can't sit down anywhere. It's impossible to carry everything around. **You have to choose – what do I keep?** Pictures, letters, a book maybe I was reading, or an extra bottle of water? It was definitely difficult. Most of the shelters don't allow you have anything with wheels, so you carry everything on your back, everything you own. It's difficult when you can't sit in one spot and bylaw is chasing you around the city, telling you to move and move and move and move and move. It's really hard.”



- Robert, 49, First Nations, said that the constant surveillance is exhausting. “We were kind of choked and upset because it just seemed like they were just constantly following us every week telling us to move.”
- Community is a form of safety for citizens who are on the streets, yet the Bylaw endangers community. **70% said the Bylaw makes it harder to be with their friends or family.**

BYLAW ENFORCEMENT IS DISCRIMINATORY

Women⁷ experience more harassment under the Bylaw. Female respondents were more likely to report having their harm reduction supplies removed and more likely to report that the Bylaw makes it harder to use drugs more safely, access services, and conserve energy.



Some **women feel threatened** by the Bylaw.

- Mary, 35: “I used to get hit on by one of the bylaw guys... He said on the daily ‘why are you down here hanging out with these kinds of people? You don't look like the type that should be hanging out with the people down here.’ And he'd hit on me. He was like ‘let me take you out for dinner’ and stuff and he made me feel very uncomfortable.”
- Linda, 42: “I feel like a lot of bylaws target people like me unfairly and unjustly. **It's like being tried and convicted all in one by a person who doesn't even know me**, for something they assume because of the way you're dressed or your lack of housing.”

⁷ Respondents' gender identities were collected by asking the open-ended question “What is your gender?”



There appears to be an **informal social hierarchy** and those who have established relationships with particular bylaw officers will experience less harassment.

- John described a bylaw officer as a “friend” and was very aware “of the do’s and don’ts with the Safe Streets Bylaw.” He explained that he has a relationship with most of the bylaw officers, so it doesn’t make life harder for him.
- Michael: “I’m freezing my brown ass out here and they say they will help me, but they haven’t yet. David, the ex-bylaw said that he will bump me to the front of the housing list – I’m like number 300 right now.”

BYLAW IS CREATING FINANCIAL BURDEN ON INDIVIDUALS, THE CITY OF PRINCE GEORGE, AND THE PROVINCE

When bylaw officers remove harm reduction supplies, they are **nullifying the important and costly work** of the First Nations Health Authority, Northern Health, and the BCCDC.

- In January 2022, nine Prince George citizens died from toxic drug poisoning.

When bylaw officers confiscate personal belongings, they create unnecessary strain on other service agencies such as shelters and crisis funding sources. In addition, **these actions force citizens to scavenge** for their survival, pushing them into a cycle of expenses.

- James, 24: “We had this brand-new 12-person tent at Moccasin Flats. It had chairs and shit inside. They tore it down. We don’t know why. After that, we went to welfare and got a crisis grant. Now we’re back here” *gestures to the corner of 3rd and George. *
- Mary, 35, First Nations (Cree): “It affected me because I had nowhere to sleep and nowhere to stay. I had to restart all over again, with no money. I had to restart again and go around and ask my friends on the street for help.”

The repercussions of continuously having tents, blankets, and belongings confiscated **forces citizens into survival mode**, contributing to increased rates of theft and petty crime.

THE CITY OF PRINCE GEORGE HAS NOT PROVIDED ADEQUATE BYLAW EDUCATION

The City of Prince George has not adequately educated the public about the Safe Streets Bylaw.



- 70% said they do not understand what the bylaw allows them to do or not to do.
- James, 24: “They haven't even told me I can do this or that. They just told me I can't do that. Well, it's your job to tell me what I can do.”
- Joseph, 26, First Nations: “Bylaw makes me feel uncomfortable. They tell us we can't sit there, that we need to move on, but they don't help us find services. **No one has given us any education about the bylaw.**”

Bylaw enforcement goes beyond the scope of Safe Streets Bylaw. Many respondents reported having their personal and sentimental belongings removed by bylaw officers. This triggers trauma, causing **unnecessary mental, emotional, psychological, and spiritual harm.**

- Elisabeth: “Bylaw throws out your stuff. They've taken two of my tents, three tarps, and thrown my blankets away, and clothing, and pictures of my kid. It makes me feel like shit. It makes me feel tiny, like I'm already out on the street living in a tent and then they come around and just make me feel like a nobody.”
- Linda, 42: “They were so dismissive of what I was saying, it felt pointless to say anything. I didn't feel heard. My experiences with bylaw officers make me feel less useful, a less important member of a society. It makes me disposable, dispensable, worthless, unwanted, unwelcome, unheard. I've been in such a daze, it does such a global damage, like on my wellbeing as a human. The first few times I lost everything it was really hard because it was pictures of people that I will never see again and animals I had that I can't get back, things that really matter to me. **Things that are irreplaceable.** I know I can get some donation clothing but it's not the same as the t-shirt you bought at a concert with your best friend.”

Bylaw disposes of sentimental belongings that help de-housed folks feel connected to their home communities and families. With minimal resources for support and well-being, people can spiral into chaos and crisis.

- Elisabeth: “They have no heart. Cause they didn't care if it was pictures of our kids or something my mom gave me. My mom's gone now; she's been gone 30 years. I've got nothing of hers left.”

Without sufficient accountability mechanisms for enforcement tactics, Bylaw enforcement seems arbitrary and dictated by the partiality of individual bylaw officers.



- Patricia, 59: “There’s two plug-ins on 3rd Ave that [my friend] can use. We use it to plug into our heater. And bylaw comes and they say you can’t stay here. And I said why not? They don’t have the signs that say you can’t park there all night. And they say okay we’re going to come back in 35 minutes and if you’re still here, we’re going to give you a ticket. I said for what?? They said for parking all night and plugging in. I said there’s no law against that. They came back, same old thing.”
- Linda, 42: “It doesn't matter what the law allows, it's individual officers. Sometimes they're having a bad day, sometimes they're just jerks but they have the power, and **the law is what the individual wants it to be.**”

Citizens targeted by the Bylaw are forced into compliance, regardless of whether they are in contravention of the policy. They feel they have little power to resist or avoid harassment.

- Sam, 49: “I've never told them no because I don't want them to call the cops on me.”
- Mary, 35: “I've argued back with them, but they say that they'll call the RCMP.”
- Linda, 42: “I think I said no to bylaw one time, and I quickly changed it to okay. But as soon as I said no, they were going to call the cops and have me arrested for having a fire that I had put up just to stay warm for a few minutes, to warm up my feet.
- Joseph, 26, First Nations: “I have told bylaw no before— I've done it. They say they will call the cops on me, then I move on. I don't know why I have to move on. I'm not on private property— there's no sign there, but I move on.”

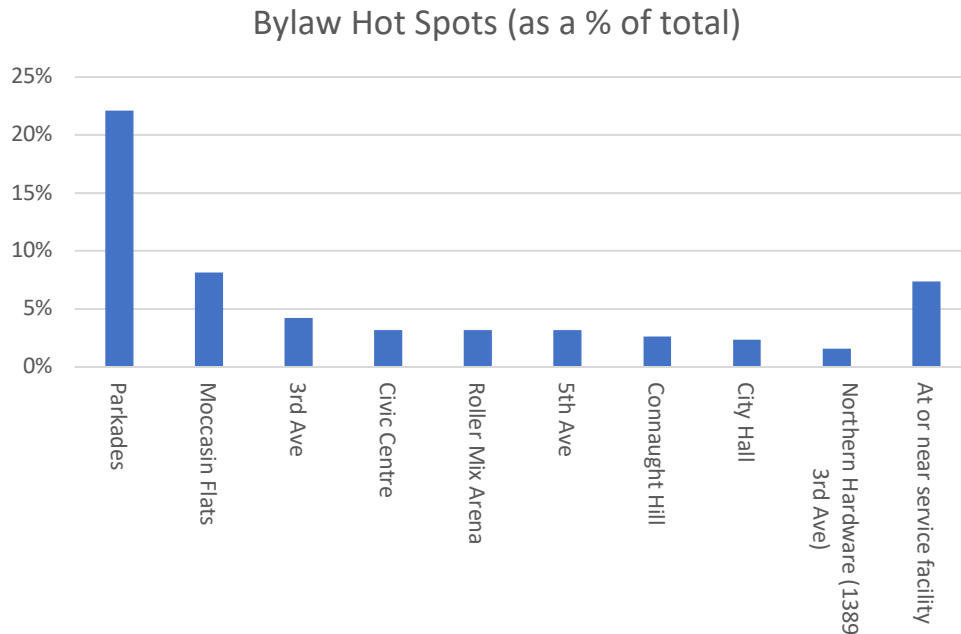
BYLAW FUNDING COULD BE ALLOCATED MORE EFFECTIVELY

Not a single respondent reported that the Bylaw makes them feel safer, cleaner, or more included. Several had suggestions for how the Bylaw budget could be used more effectively.

- Patricia, 59: “The only thing that you see bylaw pick up is our tents, our clothes, everything that we own. And there’s garbage everywhere, they could be picking that up.”
- Jane, 25, First Nations, suggested the City could “make an apartment for more homeless people. Resources for homeless people. **Every time my husband and I have a place, we get clean.** Every time we are out here, we get loaded and are not motivated to do anything.”
- James, 24: “Think about it, if they gave the money to the addicts or homeless, they wouldn’t have addicts and homeless on the street. Therefore, what the fuck would you need to clean the streets for?”



APPENDIX A: BYLAW HOT SPOTS



Bylaw Hot Spot data is from a dataset compiled by Dr. Joseph Hermer, Department of Sociology, University of Toronto, and based on data obtained from the City of Prince George using a Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act request (#12-121). The request was initially made October 6, 2021, and covers any bylaw enforcement complaints or actions taken by bylaw officers related to the enforcement of the Safe Streets Bylaw #9209, 2021 since its adoption August 30, 2021, through December 8, 2021.