

Report from the Field

Informal Recycling and Street Vending in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

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In Vancouver, informal recyclers take to the streets on a daily basis to salvage recyclable materials from the garbage to generate an income from their sale. Many of these informal workers reside in the city's impoverished Downtown Eastside and are highly stigmatized. In the context of a gentrifying city, the weekly Pigeon Park Street Market has taken a group of "unemployable" people whose livelihoods have been criminalized and designated a safe and dignified space for vendors to sell their recycled materials. The social and economic benefits that are created by the market help to promote health and wellbeing, reduce feelings of stigmatization, and allow for vendor's voices to be heard in the governance of the organization.

Introduction

Vancouver, British Columbia has been repeatedly ranked as one of the most 'livable cities in the world' according to The Economist Intelligence Unit's livability ranking (EIU, 2013). As a researcher spending the summer in Vancouver, I was able to see how Vancouver can be a hospitable and beautiful place. However, my research into the economic disparity between the city's neighbourhoods and residents led me to question what it means for a city to be 'livable,' and ask exactly who the city is 'livable' for.

With the intention of discussing urban health inequities and the health status of marginalized populations, my time in the field was spent documenting the health status and lived experiences of Vancouver's informal recyclers (locally known as 'binners'). This is a group of non-sanctioned waste workers who generate an income through the collection of recyclable materials from the garbage and predominantly reside in the city's Downtown

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Eastside (DTES).

Within the context of Vancouver's booming real estate market and the gentrification of the DTES, inequity has become a visible phenomenon as high-end restaurants and shops infringe on the 'Bottle Block,' the section of Hastings Street where United We Can, the local bottle depot, is situated and where binners are often lined up on the street with their recyclable items to cash in. This section of Hastings Street is also occupied by informal vendors who have their recovered goods on display for passers-by to view. Through a partnership with United We Can, I was able to collect data; but while in the field, I also became quite intrigued by the recovered materials that can't be returned to the bottle depot for a refund and the people who sell them. This curiosity brought me to the Pigeon Park Street Market, a weekly low-barrier market that originated as a protest and is now a mainstay in the neighbourhood upon which hundreds of individuals rely for their livelihoods.

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

Vancouver's DTES is one of Canada's most impoverished communities and is often characterized by its open drug scene, homelessness, poverty, and marginalized residents. The 10-block radius of the neighbourhood is home to approximately 18,000 residents who are often subject to socioeconomic risks and health implications that are associated with disparate urban environments such as low-quality housing, food insecurity, and difficulties in accessing health services (Linden et al, 2012).

There has been an administrative tendency to overlook the social factors that shape the DTES; therefore the neighbourhood continues to be a "highly regulated space where its residents are regulated, condemned, and discriminated against" (Boyd, 2008, p.21). It is estimated that over 5,000 injection drug users reside in the neighbourhood and thousands of additional users visit the area on a regular basis in order to purchase and consume substances (Small et al, 2007).

Addiction and mental illness are issues that affect many informal recyclers in the neighbourhood. However, it is important to recognize that despite popular conceptions of these precarious workers, addiction and substance abuse does not define all binners or DTES residents. The data I collected in the field was focused around the social determinants of health (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010) and the way in which several hazardous social conditions in the neighbourhood combine and contribute to the multiple health issues, drug addiction, and reduced life expectancy that the local binners experience.

Informal Recycling in Vancouver

In an urban context, informal recyclers are non-sanctioned workers who recover recyclable resources such as beverage containers, metal, electronics, and clothing from

households, businesses, and public garbage bins. They generate a profit by selling these materials to middlemen, directly to the industry at bottle depots, or to customers on the street through informal street vending. As an informal economic opportunity, this activity is often a survival strategy for no- or low-income individuals in urban areas as this type of work often enables impoverished people to gain independence without having to resort to begging or criminal activity (Gutberlet et al, 2007). The socio-environmental situation in the DTES, in combination with B.C.'s beverage container refund laws (B.C. Ministry of Environment, 2004), have created an economic opportunity and motivation for this work to increase significantly in recent years.

Vancouver's informal recyclers (or bidders) are a marginalized group of people who are exposed to a number of health threats that originate from both their work with waste and their socioeconomic position in society. Although this activity takes these individuals all throughout the city, a majority of these workers live in the DTES and return their bottles to the local bottle depot. Despite the environmental benefits that informal recycling provides to urban areas through waste recovery and litter reduction, these workers remain highly stigmatized. Gutberlet (2010) states "recyclers represent one of the most widely excluded, impoverished and disempowered segments of society" (171). Informal recyclers are often associated with the garbage that they work with and are perceived as a nuisance or even as criminals by the public (Nas & Jaffee, 2004).

The informal recycling economy provides an environmental service to the city and has grown to not only encompass those who recover beverage containers, but also includes the vendors who salvage other reusable materials from the garbage to sell on the street. Many of these informal sector workers engage in both activities in order to diversify their income and secure their livelihoods. These stigmatized workers already face several barriers in securing their income and stabilizing their health, but informal vending has experienced a recent crackdown by law enforcement in the DTES where the political climate of the community has provided space for the Pigeon Park Street Market to arise.

Origins of the Pigeon Park Street Market

The Pigeon Park Sunday Street Market began in May 2010 when the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood Council (DNC), a group of community residents, responded to ticketing blitzes undertaken by the Vancouver Police Department during the lead-up to the 2010 Olympic Games. This ticketing campaign of the DTES consisted of tickets being given out to local residents for bylaw infractions like street vending, jaywalking, and urinating in lanes. It was later confirmed that between 2008 and 2012, 95% of the city's street vending tickets and 76% of the city's jaywalking tickets had been handed out in the neighbourhood (Pivot, 2012). This targeted criminalization of poverty-related behaviours infuriated many local health advocates, as these bylaw infractions all stemmed from health-related factors

that are commonly experienced in the DTES like lacking a home and a secure income. One of the market's coordinators reflects:

How much money is it going to cost to ticket their way out of the street disorder issue in front of the bottle block? Enormous police presence, enormous cost in tickets... essentially the solution is jail when all people are really doing is trying to supplement welfare and they're doing it in the most independent and the least harmful to society way. They are going through people's trash, they're recycling it, and they are selling it. Because they don't have a legitimate place to sell it, they're being criminalized and thrown into jail (R. Clarke, August 26, 2013).

In an attempt to highlight the local protest against the ticketing of street vendors on Hastings Street, DNC members and a group of volunteers went to Pigeon Park and walked around telling people that it was safe to vend in that location. On the first day of the market, there were three vendors with blankets on the ground containing their goods: "It took a long time to convince the vendors that it was actually safe to go there," said R. Clarke.

Since then, the weekly market has grown substantially to host between 100 to more than 200 vendors every Sunday. By the end of the first year of operations, the vendors who started selling their wares on the ground were obtaining better products, renting tables and tents, and preparing for the market by putting prices on items and wrapping up cords. The vendors also have several opportunities to get involved in the governance of the market, as they are encouraged to participate in membership meetings and volunteer groups where the vendors can have their voices heard and participate in decision-making that has a direct impact on their livelihoods.

Significance of the Street Market

Whether exclusively collecting bottles and cans, street vending, or—as is often the case—a combination of both, informal recyclers are often described as "unemployable," with many of those participating in the activity being reliant on social assistance payments. Tremblay (2007) points out that there is a strong correlation between social assistance cut-backs in B.C. between 1995-2002 and a marked increase in binning activity during these years. She also notes that the number of binners fluctuates on a monthly basis with more activity towards the end of the month, which can be attributed to the social assistance pay schedule. Clarke remarked that in the earlier years of the market, the average pot for the 50/50 draw fluctuated greatly between the week before welfare payments and the week afterwards. In 2013, the 50/50 draw has leveled off at the higher end of the scale, indicating that the market is now consistently attracting a wealthier demographic of customers and bringing more money into the neighbourhood (R. Clarke, August 26, 2013).

Many people rely on the income that they make vending at Pigeon Park on Sundays. In addition to providing a safe place for these informal sector workers to vend in public, the market is redefining what it means to be “employable” while providing a level of formality and dignity to the salvaging of recycled goods. In my own interactions with these workers, many expressed a sense of pride about being a member of the street market and attending meetings or having a specific place where they vend every Sunday. Jacek Lorek, Clarke’s coordinating partner for the market, echoes this indication:

When people go, they sell something and they have some money...they feel like they’re worth something, they don’t have to ask somebody for a free meal or something for free...it’s basically a step to being more independent and having their own voice. We see people starting very low and building something up again, a life (J. Lorek, August 26, 2013).

In providing a safe place for vendors to sell their recycled goods in an accepting environment, the street market is making positive contributions to health and wellbeing in the neighbourhood. The criminalization of poverty-related behaviours had adversely affected health in terms of increased feelings of discrimination as well as stress and anxiety (People’s Health Radio, 2011). The street market not only provides vendors with an opportunity to make an independent income and promote their health through the acquisition of basic things like food and housing, but it can also foster a sense of pride and lower anxiety and perceived social stigma.

Street Market Politics and the Street Vending Economy

Despite its protest roots, the Pigeon Park Sunday Street Market is now working in cooperation with the City of Vancouver. Based on their records and estimates, Clarke and Lorek estimate that approximately \$10,000 is generated by the vendors on an average Sunday and that hundreds of thousands of dollars are brought into the DTES through the market on an annual basis. This revenue is remarkable, considering that the weekly Sunday market costs \$600 to put on (DTES Street Market, 2013).

The street market is not only bringing an increasing number of tourists and Vancouver residents into the DTES on Sundays, but is also providing vendors with a consistent income that they rely on. If not for this income, there would be increased potential for financial desperation to result in dangerous behaviours that could contribute negatively to the health of individuals and to the “street disorder” that law enforcement has attempted to eliminate through ticketing. By giving street vendors a safe place to legally vend, the Sunday Market is contributing to a reduction in street disorder and providing a livelihood to people who need it.

There has been concern expressed in the media about the presence of stolen goods and drug dealing in the market, as well as some complaints by local businesses. Clarke and Lorek have worked to address these concerns and have undertaken actions to improve the aesthetics of the market. The bike lanes and areas in front of businesses have been cleared as “No Vending Zones” with volunteer security guards posted to ensure that vendors don’t set up in these areas and block pedestrians and customers. Tents and tables have been purchased in order to facilitate the vendors in their selling of their goods and to help to create a more legitimate look for the market.

During my weeks observing the market, it was clear that there is a concerted effort to work with police officers to eliminate stolen goods and drug dealing increase the legitimate selling of recycled goods. The coordinators and volunteers have formed relationships with the police officers that regularly attend the market and monitor them to ensure that any actions or confiscation of goods is legitimate and follows due process. These efforts to defend the vendors and work with the City and law enforcement have resulted in attitude shifts in the area surrounding the market. In a 2011 study, Quinlan surveyed local business owners and found that for the majority of the businesses, the street market has little to no impact on their operations.

The top priority for the market coordinators is not maintaining the protest element of the market, but the benefit that it provides for the vendors. Clarke argued that if neither he nor the volunteers showed up on a Sunday morning, the market would still happen:

This is a highly motivated group of people who have a reason to go there on Sundays and are refusing to be pushed out, so from that standpoint, it has nothing to do with your rhetoric or how much you yell at the city or the cops, but has everything to do with the existence of the endeavor. It is there and it helps people and it maintains itself (R. Clarke, August 26, 2013).

The Pigeon Park vendors may not be concerned about whether the market has a permit, but they do care about being able to make the money that they need to survive. The social protest of vending on Hastings Street, as well as the protest roots of the market, are reinforced by the economic dependence that people have on informal recycling and street vending. The economic motivation that propels the market ensures that it has a hope to continue benefiting the DTES community into the future.

Policy Recommendations

During my time in the field, 88% of the informal recyclers that I interviewed thought that they were doing a “green job” by removing recyclable materials from the waste stream. However, less than 20% felt as though city residents treated them with respect. Despite

the important role that these workers play in Vancouver's Zero Waste initiative, informal recyclers have not received any recognition in the City's action plans for green jobs or reduced waste. In order to promote and support the livelihoods of Vancouver's street vendors, the municipal government should acknowledge these informal workers and the contributions that they make to the reduction of waste in the city. Informal recyclers would greatly benefit from being included in the Zero Waste Action Plans, which could provide access to a more secure income and reduced feelings of stigmatization.

As a socially excluded group, informal recyclers have little influence over the policy decisions that affect their lives. The Pigeon Park Street Market could be an important avenue with which to initiate change in this area. In Brazil, informal recyclers have joined together to form recycling cooperatives, where workers have collectively been able to build their capacity and improve their livelihoods and health status (Gutberlet, 2010). The Pigeon Park Street Market may be the beginning of a similar movement in Vancouver, as vendors are already encouraged to participate in the governance of the market and have a voice in decision-making at weekly meetings. Gutberlet maintains that government support is crucial to the improvement of the livelihoods of recyclers and the recovery of their dignity. It is therefore essential for the City of Vancouver revisit its concept of "employability" and consider informal recyclers in their plans for a greener city.

Conclusion

The Pigeon Park Street Market has embraced a criminalized form of work and has redefined popular conceptions of what it means to be "unemployable." The weekly Sunday market provides a safe and dignified space for hundreds of vendors to work, an effort that brings thousands of dollars into the neighbourhood every week. The social and economic benefits that the street market creates help to promote health and wellbeing, reduce feelings of stigmatization, and allow for vendors' voices to be heard in the governance of the organization. When considering Vancouver's dynamic urban environment and its municipal policies championing the development of a green city, it is important for the voices of the city's dedicated informal recyclers to be heard and for their livelihoods to be secured. The Pigeon Park Street Market is a step in the right direction, helping to create a truly 'liveable' city for all.

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