

# Survey on Volunteer Engagement and the Impact of the 2010 Winter Olympics on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

Focusing on Residents in the Downtown Eastside (DTE) of Vancouver



Created by John Wikkerink. Art student at Trinity Western University.

**A field study by Cultural Anthropology Course:  
Anthropology 390 E – Sustainable Urban Development  
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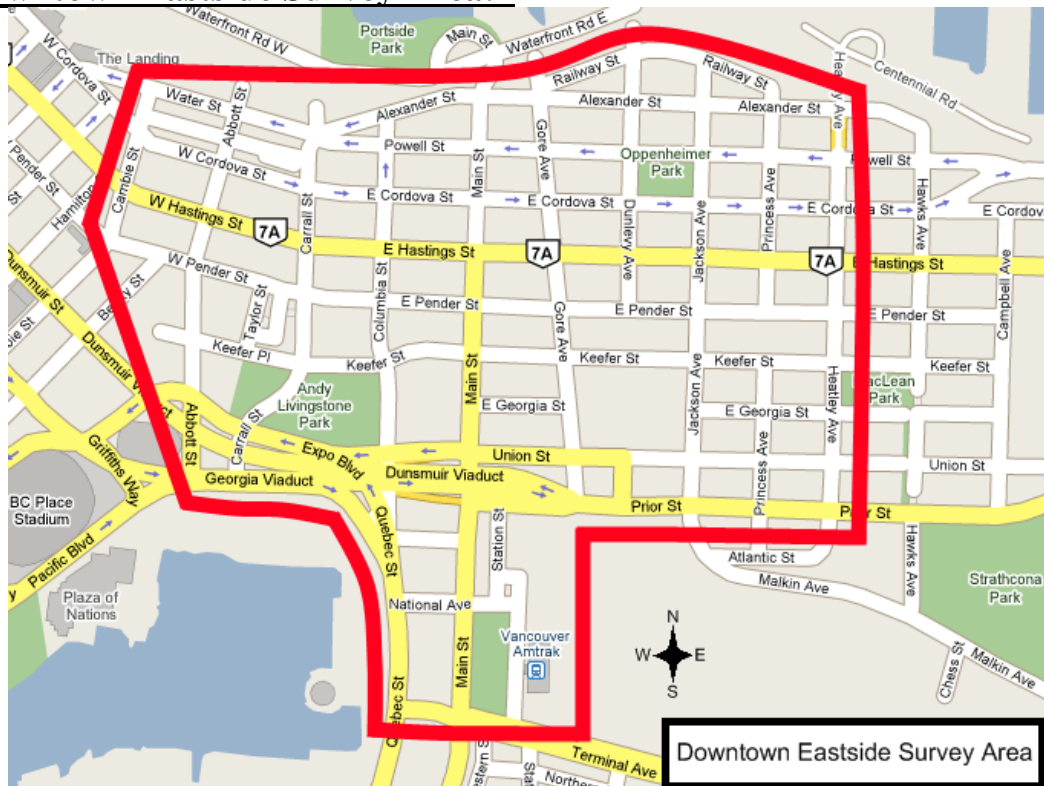
## **Survey on Volunteer Engagement and the Impact of the 2010 Winter Olympics on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside**

From June 17<sup>th</sup> to June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2007, students of the departments of Cultural Anthropology, Geography, Psychology, and Sociology at Trinity Western University conducted a survey focusing on opinions and ideas residents of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside have on the 2010 Winter Olympics. As well, they were asked about volunteer engagement during the Games and the impact the winter Olympics will have on their community. The survey was part of a week long course, Anthropology 390E - *Sustainable Urban Development*, that used Vancouver's Downtown Eastside as an example. The course was held in the Downtown Eastside. (Hereafter, DTE.)

The research was conducted through the use of a survey, because a 'one on one' survey is a valuable tool for researching the attitudes, images, concerns, needs, loyalties and priorities held by the group of interest. By creating a direct, short, easy to follow questionnaire and collecting responses from the DTE residents, the city of Vancouver, Provincial Government and the Vancouver Olympic Committee (VANOC) can draw a profile of the group as a whole. A descriptive research objective can be used to perform some cause and effects analysis to understand the source of the feelings. The DTE residents had the opportunity to express their own ideas about their involvement in the Olympics by participating in the survey.

This survey was conducted by randomly selected people in the DTE. Participants were informed about the project's objective prior to the interview. No monetary or incentives as reimbursement for conducting the interview were offered. Participants got a chance to voice their opinions and were invited to be included in the shaping of preparation of volunteer engagement during the Olympic Games. The first section of questions focused on the expectations residents have regarding the Olympic Games and VANOC, as representative Organizer for the Games. Another section focused on gauging the level of commitment residents had with regard to participating in the Games. A simple list of wishes and demands from the residents was not seen as sufficient. Students participated in classes during this time in the Ivanhoe Hotel on 1038 Main Street in Vancouver and also spent a few nights in the area. The surveys were conducted throughout the DTE during the day or at night.

## **Downtown Eastside Survey Area:**



### **Survey Participants:**

In the survey, students divided the Downtown Eastside population into two groups: DTE residents and non-residents working in the DTE, who share an interest in commenting on the Olympics.

#### **A. The Downtown Eastside Residents**

- Tenants of different Single Room Occupancy Hotels (SRO's) such as the Ivanhoe Hotel, Cobalt Hotel, Empress Hotel, Dodson Hotel, and Creekside Student residence.
- Tenants of social housing units.
- Those who spend a significant part of their day in public places such as Oppenheimer Park, Pigeon Park, and Thornton Park; on the sidewalks of streets in the DTE; or in front of the Carnegie center on Hastings/Main.
- People who spend the day at drop in facilities and have their meals at First United Church, Mission Possible, Union Gospel Mission, and Salvation Army Habourlight.
- Those who make a living by legal or illegal means on the streets and alleys of the Downtown Eastside.

<sup>1</sup> Original background image taken from Google Maps, August 31, 2007  
<http://maps.google.ca/maps?ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&hl=en&tab=wl&q=>

- The group of residents was further subdivided into residents with or without a valid address. A person with no permanent address, who sleeps outside in a public place, is considered homeless.

**B. People who work in the DTE:**

- Those who spend time working in the DTE, but don't necessarily reside there.
- Out reach and social services workers, police, ministries, churches, non-profit societies, activists, and store owners.

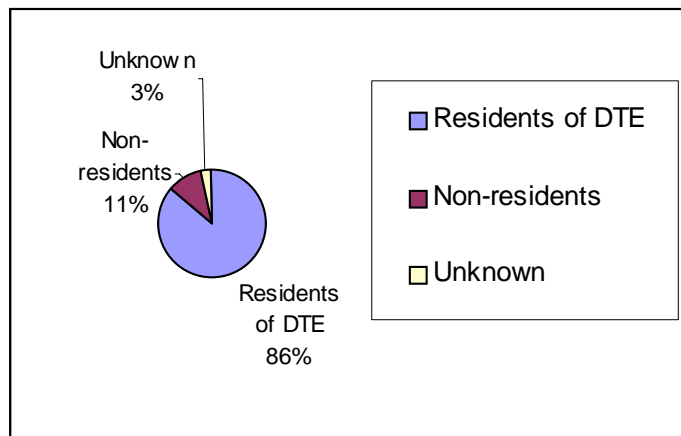
**Participant Demographics:**

In total 216 people were surveyed.

Male: 129 Female: 87

99% of participants were Greater Vancouver Regional District residents.

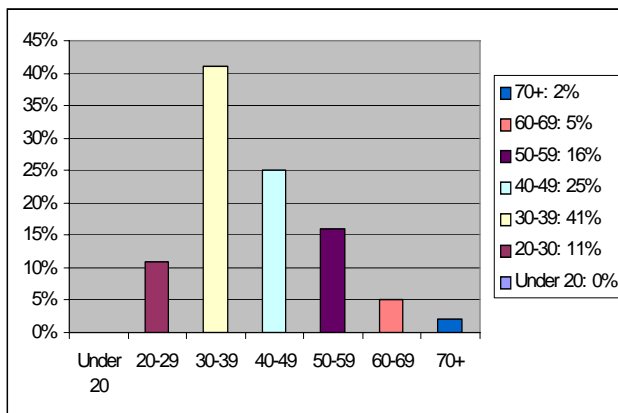
**DTE Resident or Non-resident**



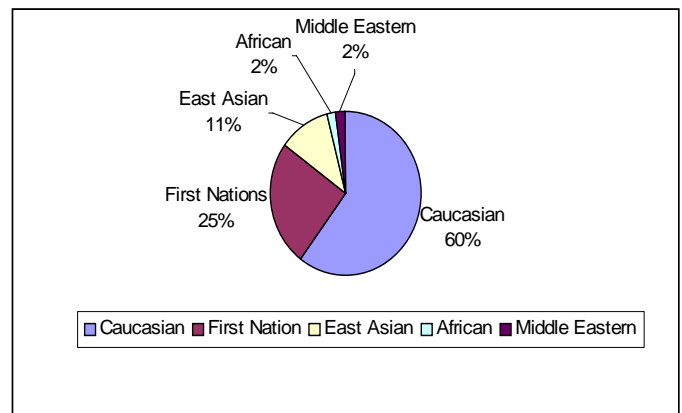
11% of the 86% of DTE residents surveyed were homeless

8% of the 11% of Non-residents were working in the DTE

**Age of Survey Participants:**



**Ethnicity of Survey Participants:**



**Approximately 75-80 people refused to participate or did not complete the survey.**

**Reasons for Refusal to Participate:**

- Language barriers.
- Several requested money on East Hastings and near First United church in exchange for doing the survey.
- Occasionally those who were approached did not want to talk, or they needed some convincing that their opinion actually mattered.
- Some participants would not give concrete answers, because they were intoxicated and had difficulties concentrating.

**Observations of Participants**

- People were more reluctant to respond, more hostile, and more negative in response to the Olympics in Oppenheimer Park, Pigeon Park and on the open streets on East Hastings, Carroll and Powell. They gradually grew more responsive the further from the area students went, south down Main street and west toward Cambie street.
- Participants were more open and willing to talk inside of community centers, churches and SRO'S; as well at the First Nations festival at Oppenheimer Park on Wednesday June 21. Store owners in Chinatown, if they spoke English, were also usually open to respond.
- Those who stated or appeared to be homeless were the most hostile in saying no to participating in the survey. In contrast, the people who appeared to be the "most well off" and in stable living conditions had the most positive responses to the Olympics.
- Many also felt that the games would only affect Vancouver while they are taking place, then everything would return to normal shortly thereafter. Two weeks of activity and change, then everything back to normal. Others cited a longer time frame but still felt the effects of the Olympics would not have a long term impact on the DTE or Vancouver.

**General Observations:**

During the interviews with residents of the Downtown Eastside, it became clear that the majority of the DTE population generally favor the plan of hosting the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver-Whistler.

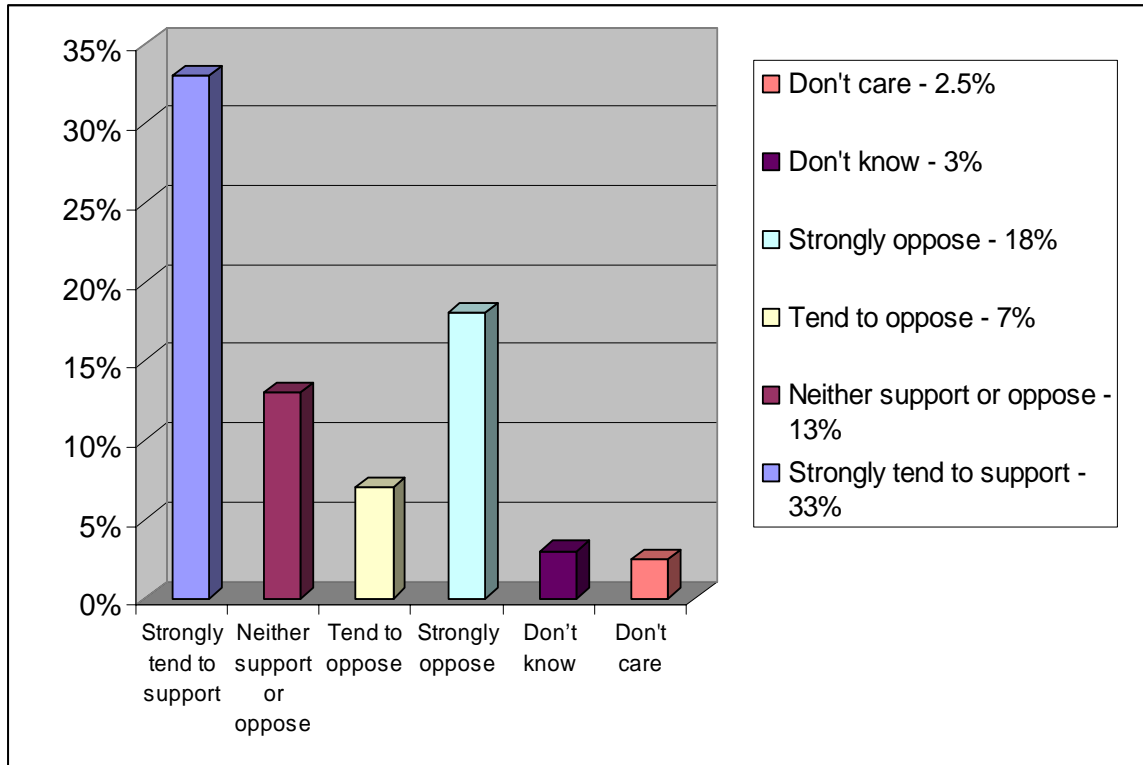
DTE residents generally expressed a positive attitude towards the Olympics, while the media tends to portray that the vast majority of DTE residents oppose the Games.

A mixed response was received for question 9. Interesting was the number of ideas (REALISTIC OR NOT) and suggestions participants had for volunteer work.

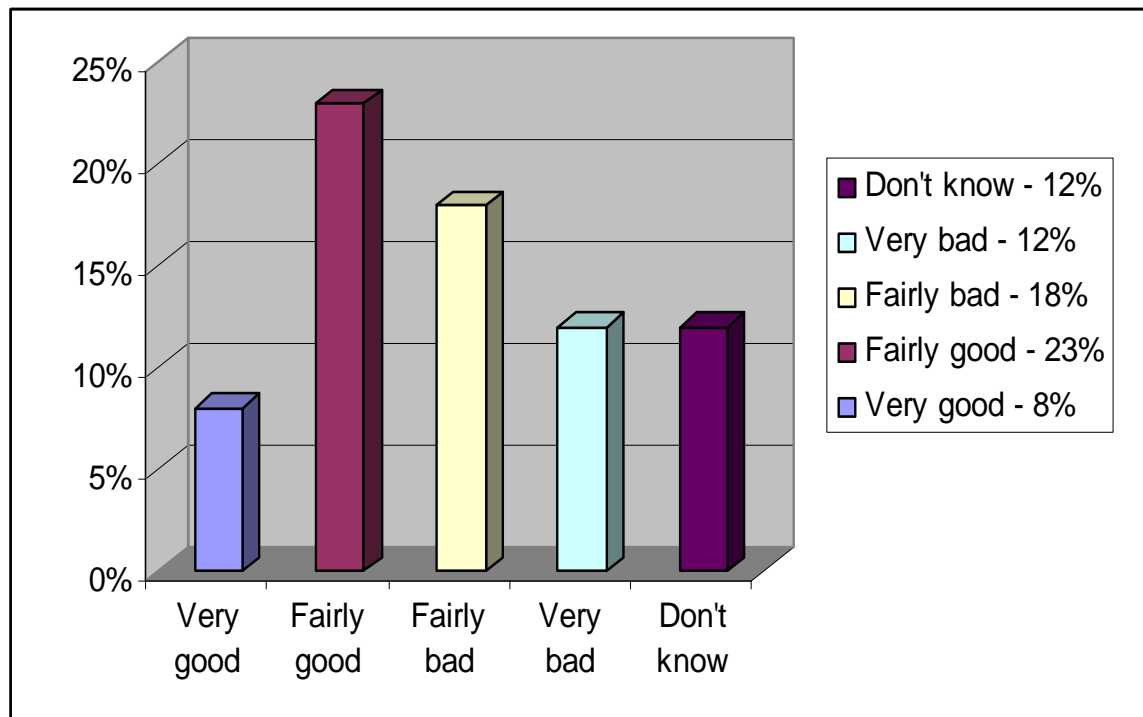
Residents stated that they are interested in participating in the Olympics as volunteers or helpers, "but no one ever asked if we would like to help." They assume the opinion of the media coverage that portrays them as being against the Olympics is carried by everyone.

## Survey Results:

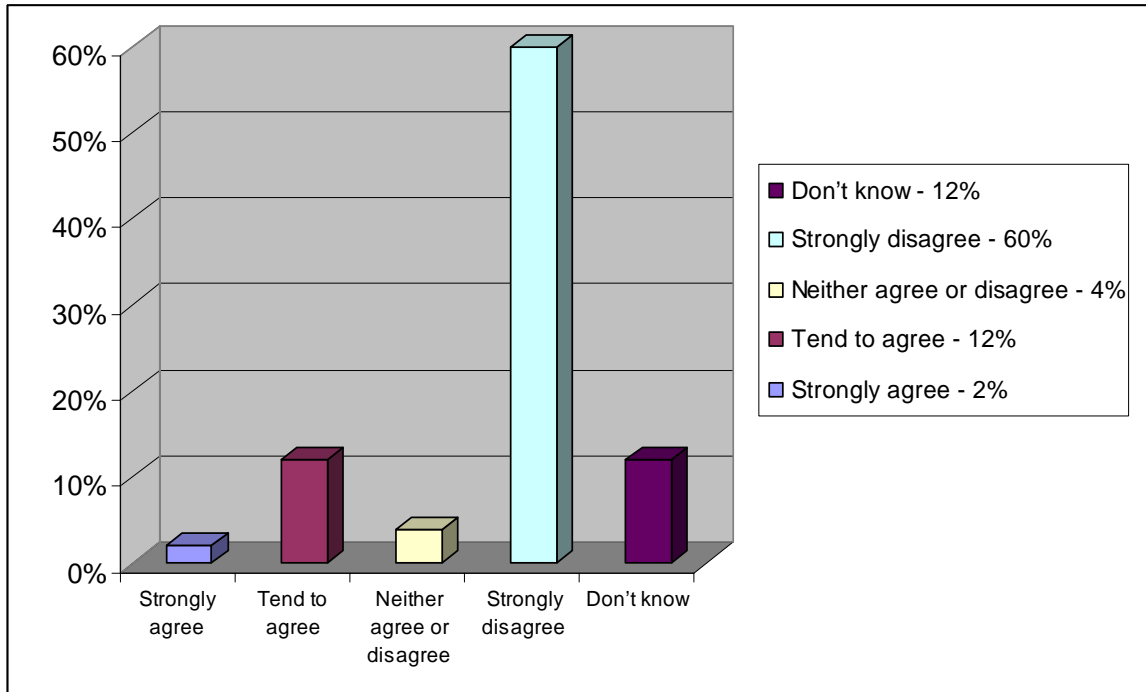
### 1. Do you support or oppose Vancouver hosting the 2010 Olympics?



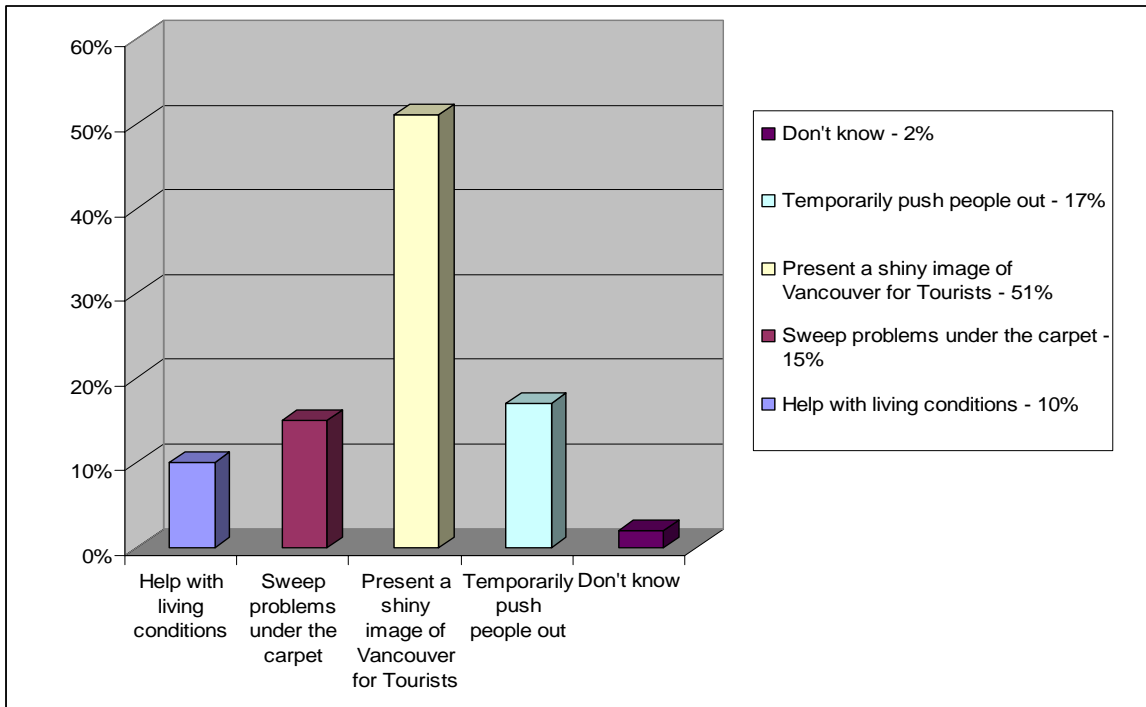
### 2. Do you think the government and the city of Vancouver are doing a good or bad job preparing for the games?



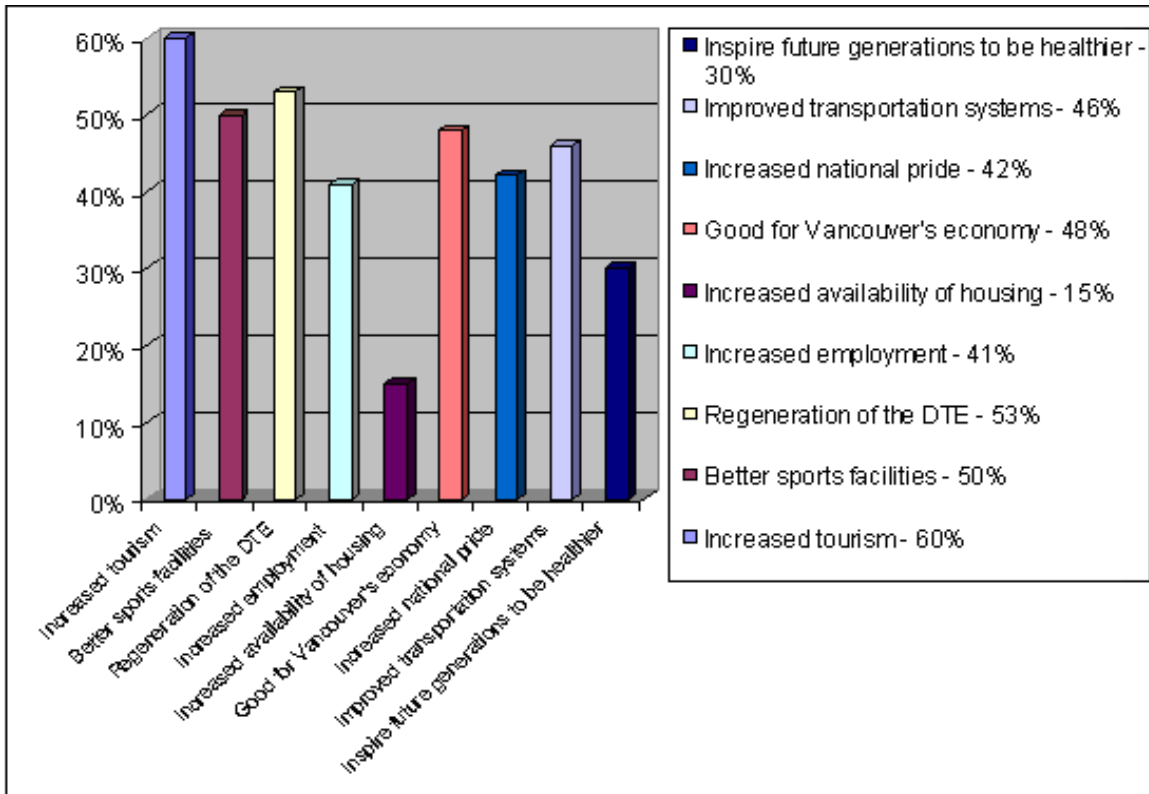
**3. Do you agree or disagree that VANOC- the Vancouver Olympic committee - is open and honest about how much the games cost?**



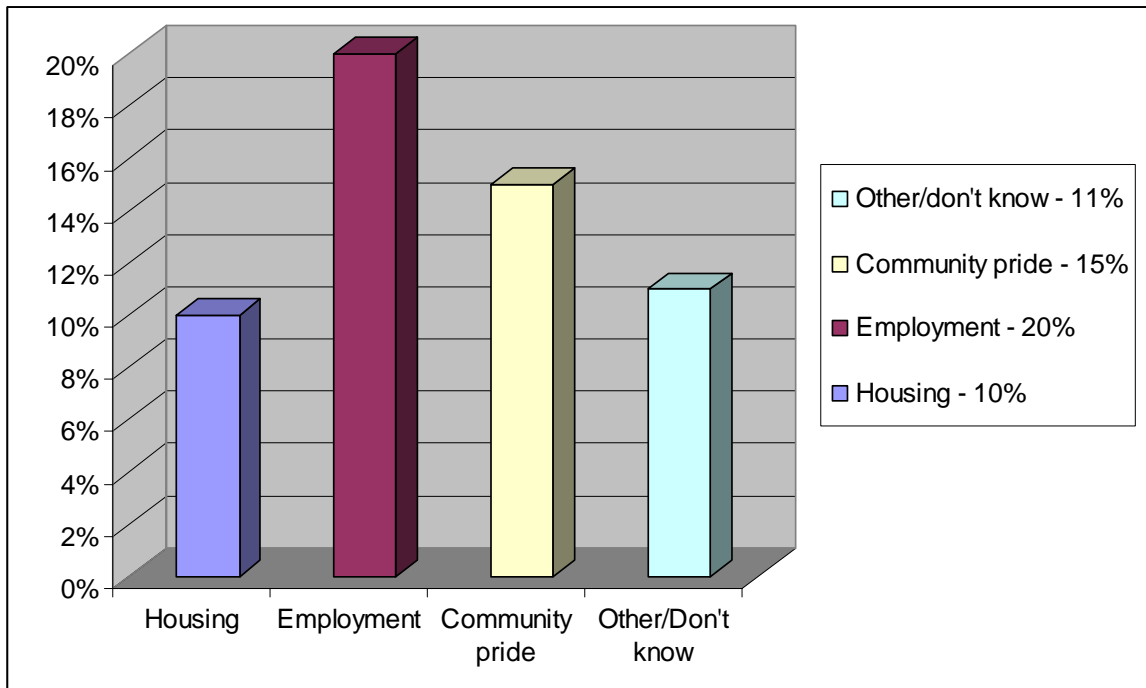
**4. The government, province and city are trying to improve conditions in the DTE; they are buying 10 new SRO'S, plan to open Riverview hospital, keep the safe injection site open, etc. Do you think this effort is made to improve the living conditions and help the people in the DTE or is it simply a quick sweep under the carpet so that tourists coming to the Games have a nice impression of Vancouver?**



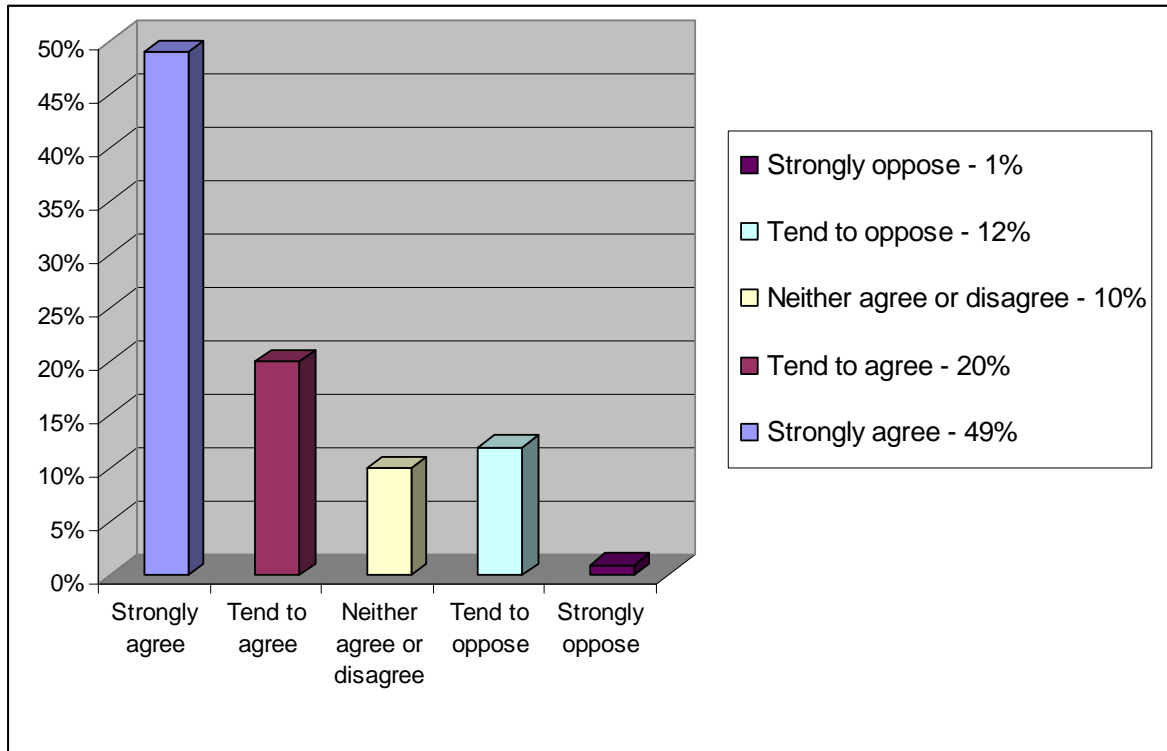
**5. I'm going to read you a list of potential benefits for Vancouver hosting the 2010 Olympics. Which, if any, do you think will happen?**



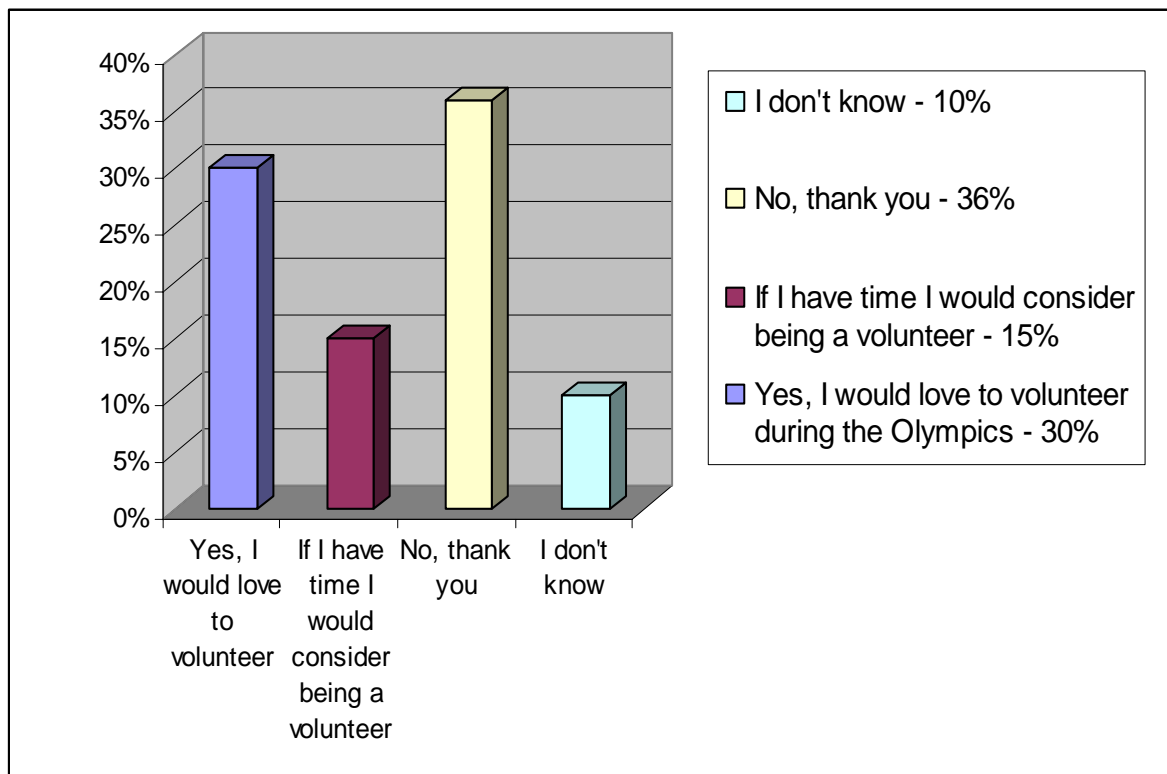
**6. Which benefits do you think residents of the DTE will get out of the Olympics?**



**7. Does development in the DTE in connection with the Olympics push out the poor and force them to live in other neighborhoods?**



**8. If members of VANOC would approach you, and ask if you wish to volunteer for diverse cultural events hosted during the Olympics, what would be your answer?**



**9. What ideas do you have for the organizers of the Olympics to help them involve residents of the DTE?**

**Suggestions from Survey Participants**

- More public meetings between VANOC and DTE residents, involving them in the planning process. DTE residents have thus far felt left out of the planning for the Olympics.
- Be honest, establish trust, show commitment, and be accountable to the residents
- Sincerity and consideration for residents of the DTE; let them know they matter too.
- Some request the government simply keep its promises to residents.
- Listen! Participants simply request that the government listen to residents and other members of the community. Engage them and ask about their feelings and opinions.
- Government decision makers should be open to creative and radical options that are socially concise. Encourage Vancouver and VANOC to think outside the box.
- More social housing.
- Clarification as to why the Olympic Village in False Creek is no longer designed for low-income housing.
- VANOC should have representatives from all the different communities in the city.

**Involvement of the City and VANOC with Residents of the DTE:**

- Have volunteer positions available.
- Offer paid positions. One participant says that residents would be excellent at maintenance, cleaning, and traffic control. These jobs are simple and manageable for uneducated members of the community. He requests \$10 an hour.
- Discounted/free tickets for transportation.
- Give free tickets to the DTE population or at least make them more affordable.
- Organization of more cultural, arts, and sports events for the locals during the games.
- Make sport facilities available for residents after the games.
- Get more women and children involved.
- One day of the Olympics devoted to residents to be involved.
- Create public events during the Olympics for the locals to participate in, such as live big screen broadcasts of Olympic events in parks or parking lots in the DTE.
- A day camp for children on the beach; one day so that parents could have a break and enjoy the city alone.
- Open churches and public spaces and create groups who pray 24/7 for safety and peace during the Olympics.

### **Jobs that residents would like to participate in:**

- Hang posters.
- Hand out programs/ brochures.
- Offer souvenirs.
- Security.
- Point out dangerous areas in the DTE.
- Empower street people to keep an eye on the city because they know what's going on.
- Directing tourists at sky train and bus stations going to different events.
- Traffic work at busy intersections, directing pedestrians.
- Food services.
- Garbage and recycling collection (they do it anyway - start a program so they can get paid to clean up the city).
- Allow residents to man booths, but ensure that background checks are administered to those working with kids.
- Painting or public art works from residents to display for the public.
- Tour guides through the historic, beautiful and not so beautiful DTE.
- Tour guides of affordable housing.
- Show tourists what VANOC did to fulfill their sustainable bid.
- Create a welcome center where residents would answer questions and recommend nice places for tourists to go. The majority of residents in the DTE know Vancouver well and would love to recommend wonderful places for visitors to go.
- It was suggested that the Olympic torch be carried for a short distance by a homeless resident of the DTE. It is unknown what route the Olympic torch will take to end up in the stadium for the opening ceremony, but the torch could be carried through the DTE and could be carried by a homeless or mentally challenged person. This would show that VANOC is not sweeping the problems under the carpet, but rather that they include the homeless and acknowledge the issue. The DTE is the ugly problem of the Olympics, but with this torch they face the criticism and acknowledge in front of the whole world who is watching that they aren't hiding the problems.

### **Other job related suggestions:**

- It was proposed from several DTE residents that VANOC target and focus on "healthy" people in the DTE who aren't on drugs, for volunteer and work positions. Heavy drug users should be prevented from obtaining any position, because of their unreliable life circumstances.
- Set up a job/volunteer co-ordination center in the DTE and offer incentives for applicants.

### **Suggestions from Non-residents:**

- Employment: hire people regardless of their income bracket.
- Listen to the voices of committees.
- Create housing/social programs.
- Conduct surveys using DTE residents.
- Make things affordable.
- Involve residents in the creating process. Include them - subsidized tickets.
- Free stuff.
- Community outreach.
- Allow residents to stay in the area.

Only two participants responded negatively to this question. One requests that the Olympics do not happen because this respondent believes a repeat of Expo '86 will occur. Another does not see a positive way to get DTE residents involved.

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### **10. Additional comments of students:**

Student 1:

- Residents seemed more interested in post-Olympic benefits rather than benefits resulting directly from involvement in the games.
- Those either in permanent residences or with jobs seemed to show disgust with the homeless and drug users in their neighborhood and were as equally interested as others in cleaning up the DTE.
- From the aboriginal respondents it seemed that there was a sense of detachment from society in relation to the Olympics. One individual responded explicitly: “natives don’t play sports”.
- One respondent expressed that VANOC was considered an enemy of the DTE and was comparable to Robert Pickton in terms of their abuse of the DTE residents.

Student 2:

I was really surprised to find out that the sex trade workers were nice to me. Two people were very happy that they got a chance to answer my questions. While I was conducting one survey on the street, one of the “working girls” came to me and asked if I could interview her. She later asked if I had any money on me and I said no, but she was not mad about it. One aboriginal lady was not happy about me interviewing aboriginals as she said they are fed up with all the surveys they do on aboriginals and I should take a course on how to interview aboriginals and learn the principals of reciprocity before asking them questions. Some people in China Town were hesitant to interview. I did not see anybody ignoring me or not wanting to answer my questions other than in China Town. The people in the Carnegie Centre (the library) were nice and answered all of my questions. The police did not help me and gave me a telephone number to call in order to get my survey done. I thought people were nice to me in general.

Student 3:

Throughout the week, I kept noticing the hopelessness that surrounded the area of the Downtown Eastside. It was just so blatantly in my face. When answering questions about VANOC, those who were in a more distraught case than others, tended to think of their opinions as useless. I was pleasantly surprised however, to meet a man named S. (who I ran into many times during this short week) who believed in actually fighting for justice. S. sees injustice happen in the DTE everyday and it is his goal to change things. I was incredibly inspired by how he went about this. By joining a drama group who goes around Vancouver and acts out pieces that display the discrimination towards the people of the DTE not only by the government of B.C., but society as well. S. was like a light in the middle of the dark cloud that hangs over this part of the city. Most others who I spent time with were hesitant to get involved with the surveys but when they did, there was this built up feeling of antipathy towards anything to do with the Olympics. S. had this to, but he also had the motivation to do something about it. As for the other people that I surveyed in the area, only those who were at the protest were outwardly expressing how they felt toward the government. A feeling of rejection and animosity toward authority lingered in many of the voices that I spoke with. Nothing has been done for them in the past. Things are being promised, but they are not being proven at the moment, and the future seems to be as bleak as the present for the residents of the DTE. Unless VANOC not only considers, but actually steps outside of its greed and looks at what is important for the betterment of ALL people, things will only continue to get worse. No applause will come to a committee that overlooks any portion of the Vancouver population. The residents of the DTE have been looked upon by most people in Vancouver as absolutely worthless, but as Viktor Frankl says, the value of human life does not lie in the sense of usefulness to society, value lies in the sense of dignity. The residents of the DTE need to be reminded of their value and their dignity. The only way to change Vancouver is to uplift ALL residents and let them ALL know how important they are to the foundation of the city. Vancouver is not West Van. It is not North Van. It is not East Van either. It is Vancouver. It is all of those combined and that means that all people need to work together for the betterment of our city.

Student 4:

The residents of the DTE seem to have the feeling that the city and VANOC will not do anything good for them. There is a sense of powerlessness, indifference, and frustration. Some people told me, that many in the DTE only care about free food and drugs. There is a unique culture of drug users, mentally ill, and poor. They are a marginalized group and it seems there is no bridge between them and the rest of society. In order to foster a sense of belonging to the rest of society, people in the DTE and the larger community need to work together. The city and the people of Vancouver need to change their attitudes, give the DTE population hope, and care for them even though it will be challenging. It is likewise necessary for residents of the DTE to change their outlook and believe that change is possible.

While I was conducting the survey, I did not feel strong antagonism from those who refused to take part in the survey. Instead, I felt indifference from them. The Chinese and those on East Hastings often declined to participate in the survey. The younger Chinese in Chinatown were more receptive than the older Chinese who usually

spoke little English. It was difficult for me to approach people on the corner of East Hastings and Main, Pigeon Park, and Oppenheimer Park since these areas are visibly poor and there is an apparent sense of darkness that seems to create a strong barrier.

Although I cannot conclude anything with only the responses of 20 participants from the survey, I felt that those who answered the survey questions revealed feelings of powerlessness and frustration, as well as distrust towards VANOC and the government. Some of those who took part in the survey were indifferent towards the Olympics and its effect on their lives. Many expressed a belief that the Olympics are a money-making scheme/opportunity for the rich to get richer while the poor gain nothing. A large portion of participants mentioned that the Olympics will be costly and that it could create debts that tax payers will have to cover. Many also mentioned that there will be less affordable housing since real-estate prices keep climbing. Participants often stated that there would be little or no benefits for the DTE and that the Olympics would likely have little or no positive effects on their lives.

Although many expressed negative opinions in the survey, I was surprised that about half of the participants were willing to be a volunteer for public events during the Olympics. Through being involved in the Olympics as a volunteer they can gain self confidence, give themselves a sense of importance, and help bridge the gap between them and the rest of society; especially if their contributions are acknowledged by the larger community. It could be possible that volunteers from the DTE will help change the perceptions that many non-residents have of the area.

In this way, the Olympics could be an opportunity to make changes in DTE, if the government and the city are willing to listen. The government and the city will have to adopt a more humane attitude in dealing with residents of the area. Otherwise it is likely that the Olympics will further increase the marginalization of people in the DTE.

There also seems to be an invisible barrier between Chinatown, the DTE, and the larger community of Vancouver. The Chinese, except for the younger generation, speak little English and it was hard to find those who were willing to take part in the survey. This is a reflection of the racism and discrimination that has occurred throughout the history of Chinatown. It seems to me that this is one of the biggest obstacles to surmount in order to bridge the gap between Chinatown, the DTE, and the larger city of Vancouver. The city should know that the Olympics could be the ideal opportunity to start establishing a healthy atmosphere in the DTE and to help unify the different neighborhoods of Vancouver into a cohesive whole that is working towards bettering the lives of all in society.

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All interviews were done to the best of our knowledge.

Students added their own opinions at the end of the survey in a separate section.

There may be a 2-3% margin of error in the statistics.