

# Downtown Neighbourhood Safety Audit 2021



Nanaimo Community Policing

*Acknowledgements: Nanaimo Community Policing would like to thank Vancouver Island University's 2021 Criminology Practicum Students for their support and contributions to the Neighbourhood Safety Audits*

# Introduction

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The Nanaimo Neighbourhood Safety Audit is a hands-on crime prevention initiative undertaken by the Nanaimo Community Policing program in collaboration with the RCMP, Neighbourhood Associations, Vancouver Island University, and many other people and organizations in Nanaimo. Safety audits are a useful tool which have been used in many cities throughout Canada and the U.S to help address safety challenges in neighbourhoods.

Safety Audits work to promote neighbourhood safety by identifying factors relating to safety and crime. Safety Audits allow neighbourhoods to work with residents, businesses, police and other agencies to find ways to reduce the opportunities for crime and incorporate relevant crime prevention programming. The findings of the Safety Audits are based on residents' and business owner's experiences and perceptions of crime and safety, crime statistics, social contexts of the local neighbourhood and Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) assessments of problematic locations found in the neighbourhood.

Safety Audits have the potential to bring about a wide range of benefits, including:

- Reduction in opportunities for neighbourhood crime by working to address criminogenic factors.
- Identify a neighbourhood's strengths and weaknesses in regards to crime and safety, and work with neighbourhoods to incorporate community safety and crime prevention tools.
- Increase residents' awareness of neighbourhood crime and crime prevention, as well as reduce levels of fear of crime through the spread of information.
- Reduces isolation and creates opportunities for residents and businesses to share their experiences of crime and vulnerability.
- Strengthens connection between residents as they work together to build a strong and healthy neighbourhood.
- Creates a strong relationship between residents, RCMP, neighbourhood associations, blockwatches and other organizations through collaboration and communication.

The Neighbourhood Safety Audit seeks to give residents an opportunity to have their voices be heard, and prioritizes effective collaboration between neighbourhoods and other aspects of the community. The recommendations presented in this report are based on the needs of neighbourhood residents, and are intended to work towards effective, long-term interventions to address issues of safety and crime. Safety Audits are a tool that can greatly contribute to safer and healthier neighbourhoods in Nanaimo.

## Background

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The Downtown Neighbourhood of Nanaimo was one of six sites selected by the project team to have a safety audit conducted. A range of factors made this neighbourhood a promising candidate for the safety audit initiative. It was determined that a Neighbourhood Safety Audit could help address issues present in the Downtown neighbourhood, and promote positive change in several areas.

Prior to conducting the Downtown safety audit, residents of this area had expressed a variety of concerns relating to neighbourhood safety and crime. Many would argue that this area has been hardest hit as far as social complexities and public disorder. In addition, Downtown core residents responded enthusiastically to initial inquiries about their interest in the Neighbourhood Safety Audit project. It was evident that these residents were highly invested in the safety and well-being of their neighbourhood. The strong commitment to the health and safety of their neighbourhood demonstrated by Downtown residents and businesses was a key factor in the decision to conduct a safety audit in this area, as this was a key aspect of effective cooperation between residents and the project team.

The Downtown Neighbourhood's strong community associations also played a key role in facilitating the safety audit of this area of Nanaimo. The Victoria Crescent Association, Neighbours of Nob Hill Society and the security representative from The Beacon located on Cameron Island aided the project team in gaining an understanding of the issues facing the Downtown Neighbourhood, the priorities of residents, and the best ways to engage with members of the neighbourhood. These contributions were highly valuable, and guided the focus of the Downtown safety audit.

## Pre-Audit Survey Results

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The pre-audit survey distributed to the Downtown Neighbourhood provided a valuable look into the concerns and priorities of the area's residents. This influenced the direction of the Downtown safety audit, and helped guide the efforts of the project team. In total, 239 downtown residents and businesses responded to the pre-audit survey.

Results of the survey showed that Downtown residents held overall positive views of their neighbourhood. 75% of survey respondents stated they felt a strong or very strong sense of belonging to the neighbourhood. 71% said they would recommend the neighbourhood to others, and over 55% stated they never felt uncomfortable or out of place due to personal characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, or language. 88% of respondents reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with their relationships with friends and family and felt like they could call on them for help, and 81% were satisfied with their relationships with neighbours. Downtown residents also reported high overall levels of trust for neighbours, work colleagues, and local businesses (83%).

While these figures are encouraging to an extent, other results from the survey suggest that Downtown neighbourhood residents are quite concerned about personal safety and crime. 59% of the sample reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their personal safety, 65% believed that crime rates had increased in recent years, and 57% thought that crime occurred more frequently in their neighbourhood than in others. About 26% of respondents stated they felt unsafe walking alone during the day, and 72% said they felt unsafe walking alone at night. It is clear that Downtown Nanaimo residents experience concerns about their level of personal safety. When asked about their most significant sources of information on crime and safety, 73% of the respondents indicated they relied on their own personal experience, 65% used the word of mouth from other people, 44% referred to their local newspaper and 34% relied on social media sources.

In regards to why survey respondents felt the way they did about crime and safety, a variety of reasons were provided. Many respondents stated that the high prevalence of homeless individuals and drug users in the area contributed strongly to concerns about safety. A large portion of the sample associated these individuals with criminality, writing “Homeless people on drugs are unpredictable and scare me” and “Presence of homeless people make me feel unsafe” as an example of these fears. Many others pointed to being the victim of, or witnessing incidents of property crime as a key reason for feeling unsafe. Beyond this, a large number of respondents stated that the lack of police presence in the neighbourhood was creating feelings of fear (67%). Many individuals stated that they believed there were not enough patrols, and inadequate enforcement of certain types of crime. However, 29% of others disagreed, stating that the already strong police presence was itself contributing to their fear of crime, as it brought more visibility to the issue of neighbourhood crime. Another interesting finding was that 86% viewed the role of policing in ensuring neighbourhood safety as important however 53% believed that other crime prevention strategies such as programming for youth, life skills training, neighbourhood development initiatives, leadership and resiliency programs, environmental design and restorative justice were not being effectively utilized in the downtown area. 88% of the respondents also indicated that mental health services also played an important role in crime and safety.

49% of respondents indicated that it would be likely that they would fall victim to having their residence or business burgled, 36% thought they would likely be robbed and 77% of being harassed. Finally, 70% of respondents were victims or knew someone who was a victim to a break in, a robbery or were physically assaulted/harassed. Downtown neighbourhood residents offered a range of opinions as to how the concerns they identified should be addressed. A significant portion of the sample believed that a greater RCMP presence in the area would reduce the prevalence of crime, and improve feelings of safety. Many others favoured alternative measures to this, including offering more support services to homeless and addicted people, and working to address the root causes of these issues. Moreover, a fair number of respondents were challenged with the ways in which the City of Nanaimo has attempted to control these issues, with one respondent identifying their primary concern as “More support for people experiencing homelessness, more money into housing, harm reduction, mental health. The problem will just keep getting worse if the city keeps putting up fences and harassing them”.

It is evident that Downtown Nanaimo residents feel highly concerned about neighbourhood crime and personal safety. One of the last question on the survey asked respondents what they loved most about their neighbourhood, many statements referred to the great potential the downtown neighbourhood had. They talked about the walkability of the downtown area, the accessible waterfront, the history and the neighbours they have. Clearly interventions have to be made in order to address these issues and build on the positives of the Downtown Neighbourhood. The results of this survey provided detailed insights into what the pressing needs of the Downtown Neighbourhood are, and guided the efforts of the safety audit project.

## Downtown Safety Audit Summary

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On May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2021 at 7 pm neighbourhood residents and business representatives gathered to conduct a safety audit along a route that was identified through online survey and anecdotal sources as presenting community safety challenges. Due to COVID safety protocols, participation was limited to 10 participants. The Downtown Neighbourhood Safety Audit, had 3 neighbourhood residents, 3 business owners participate along with a criminology practicum student, the Community Policing Coordinator and the City of Nanaimo Social Planner. The residents that participated represented other key groups in the neighbourhood, specifically, the Friends of Nob Hill Society and a downtown business association. There was such a high demand to participate in the audit that those who could not attend due to space completed a mini audit checklist at a different day and time. In total we had 19 individuals participate in the Safety Audit and each followed the same route. The route chosen, as mentioned previously, was largely based on feedback from those living and working in the Downtown Neighbourhood. The route included commercial hubs, trails/pathways and residential areas. (See Appendix A for specific route information)

### *Nob Hill Park (Location #1)*

The safety audit began at the Nob Hill park location. Historically the area around the park has been challenging. Some of the challenges were attributed to the single room occupancy buildings operating in the area that have been known to engage in prostitution and drug trafficking. A couple of blocks away Victoria Crescent is also infamously known for prostitution. The audit participants noted however that there were drastic improvements to the park and the area with the sale of 2 of the single occupancy buildings. There have been some improvements to the park and regular visits by the Canadian Mental Health Association's clean team. There was concerns raised about the blind spots that allow for transient people to sleep and spend time in this area. Neighbours voiced concern over the small number of children utilizing the park and how they would love to see more children and families using the park. There was also a concern about drug use, discarded needles, and drug paraphernalia being found in the park.

*Hecate Street to Cavan Street (Location #2)*

Walking the pathway from Hecate Street to Cavan Street was challenging; it is steep and is a combination between steps and a ramp. The path was uneven, and the landscape around the walkway was overgrown and obscured views from the general public. There was only one light for the pathway, and this made evening travel through the pathway undesirable for neighbours. Cavan Street offers a sizable city parking lot for people visiting the Downtown; the area towards the rear of the lot near the pathway has overgrown bushes and shrubs. There are anecdotal reports of stolen goods being stored within the landscaping and historically



there has been some encampment activity around the parking lot and along the pathway between Hecate Street and Cavan Street. Travelling towards Victoria along Cavan Street, participants noted the accordion cages around the doors of businesses and windows and how this gave them more of a feeling of fear. The sidewalks down Cavan were clear of litter or obstruction. Upon approaching Victoria Street there was individuals sleeping and hanging out at Pioneer Park. One young woman was pacing the parking lot at the corner of Victoria and Cavan who seemed to be struggling with a mental health issue and was yelling obscenities at everyone walking by. These examples, are a common occurrence for this area as noted by the audit participants.

*Victoria Crescent from Cavan Street to Albert Street (Location #3)*

This area is centralized point for services that serve the marginalized community. There is access to food services, washroom facilities, shelter services and warming centres. With COVID limitations, many clients who access these services can only take their services to go which encourages outside loitering along the sidewalks and in any green space available. There is open drug use in these areas and selling at the corner of Victoria Crescent and Esplanade. Some of the audit participants felt that too many services were centred here and that it was impacting the local businesses and that this was inviting



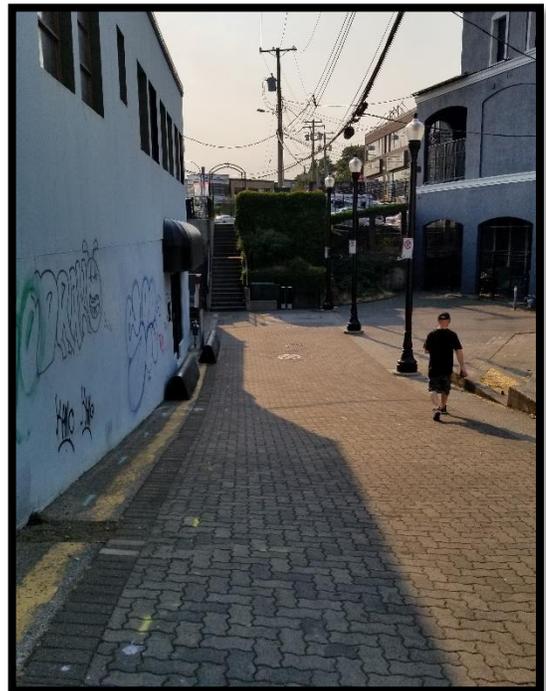
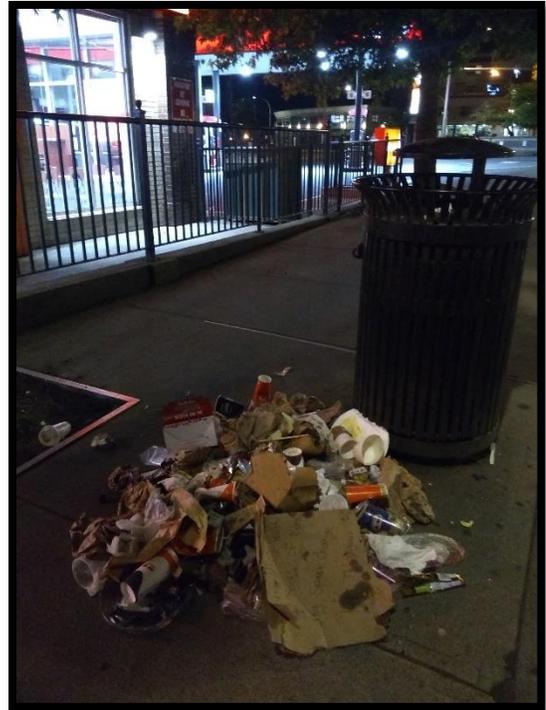
the drug trafficking. The business owners on the audit also highlighted that many customers were afraid to come to this area because of the known drug use and the unpredictability of behaviours when one is under the influence of drugs. Some businesses are simply not renewing leases here and this is leading to empty spaces and buildings.

Participants are fearful of the recent fires that have been started in the area. There are fires being started in alcoves, door ways and windows along buildings. This was evident on the audit as participants pointed out multiple burn spots through the area right next to buildings. There are major concerns that one of these fires could cause a building to catch on fire. A few of the audit participants mentioned the Community Police Station that used to be located on Victoria Crescent and the dynamic and proactive services that were offered out of the station. This included the bike unit and the ambassador program where ambassadors walked a “beat” downtown. They built relationship with individuals who were homeless and provided visibility downtown for safety. The participants indicated they wanted those structures back in place.

Finally, a couple of participants on the audit had some concerns about the new traffic pattern along Victoria Crescent from Cavan Street to Esplanade. They were skeptical on the traffic safety and mentioned that it took key parking away from businesses. Others mentioned that they found the changes visually appealing.

#### *Lois Lane / China Steps (Location #4)*

Similar reports were made about this area as to the previous location. The empty ACME lot was pointed out as an eye sore and audit participants felt that the lot brought the area into further degradation and increased feelings of abandonment. This was perpetuated by the abandoned old A & B Sound Building. Lois Lane is well hidden from public view and has very little positive activity happening there outside of business hours. The area is dark after hours due to limited lighting. Even though there is a porta potty available in the Shaw Lane Parking lot, businesses opening up in the morning at this



location find urine and feces on the steps and door ways to their businesses. They also noted that the businesses struggle with graffiti in this area.

#### *Front Street (Location #5)*

Front Street wraps around Port Place Mall. Across the street from Port Place Mall at the corner of Front Street and Esplanade contained one of the largest tent cities noted in British Columbia, called Discontent City. At the height of the tent city in 2018, it was estimated to have 300 people sheltering in make shift shelters and tents. It created a big impact on the area with counter protests, fires, overdoses, thefts and assaults to name a few incidents. As noted previously, this general area is frequented by marginalized individuals for a whole range of supportive services. The frequency of empty lots and green spaces also makes this area attractive when individuals who are homeless have no where else to go. While on the audit, travel included following Front Street along the Port Place Shopping Centre. On the south western side of the Port Place property, there is some landscaping that allows individuals to take temporary shelter and remain invisible. There was evidence of needle debris and other litter in the overgrown landscape. Past site visits have also shown this particular spot of the property to be well used.



Since Discontent City, Port Place Mall has utilized the services of private security. The overall property has security services patrolling the whole area including the parking lot and parking garage. Individual stores and businesses, including the Casino, also contract their own private security services. It is estimated by the audit participants that there are usually about 8 – 10 different security guards patrolling the area at different times of the day. Audit participants mentioned that the security services helped to create a sense of safety.

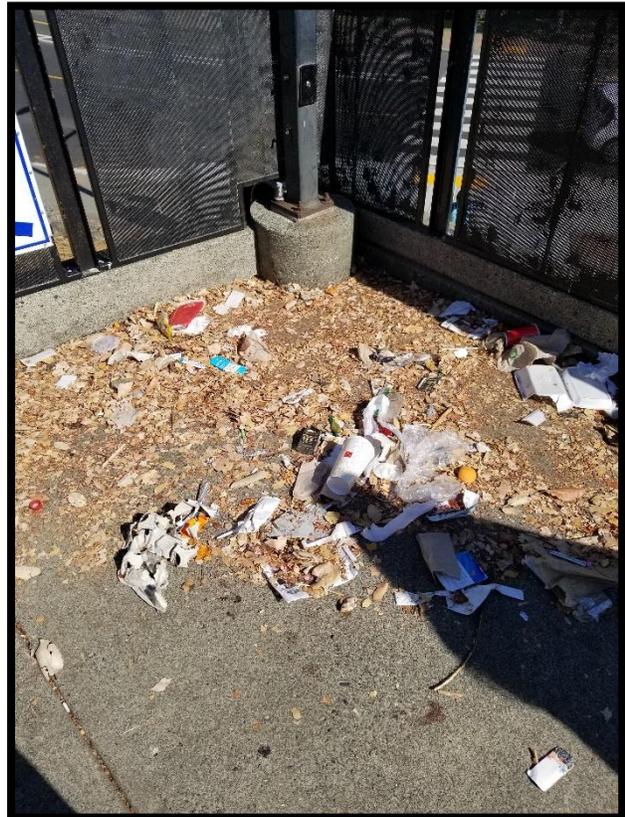
There was some concern for pedestrian safety along the sidewalk located at the bus stop location on the south end of the Port Place property right next to the parking garage. The sidewalks are extremely narrow and has sharp corner that lacks visibility for pedestrians and motorists.

On Front and Promenade Drive, several audit participants lived in the surrounding condo buildings. They noted that they had individuals who were homeless attempt to sleep in their external stairwells of the buildings however the stratas have taken the initiative to close off access to these stairwells. The residents also reported evidence of multiple attempts for unauthorized individuals to access their

parkades. These attempts have been unsuccessful. The design of the buildings, landscaping and placement of property is an excellent example of Crime Through Environmental Design Principles. Although the buildings are located in a challenging area, residents report feeling very safe while on the property.

*Cameron Road, Military Museum (Location #5)*

This location was of significant concern and had emotional responses attached to the area. The Military Museum is a place of remembrance for 414 local men and women who dedicated their life for their country. The area faces a regular occurrence of theft, break ins, graffiti and vandalism. The museum operator shared stories of finding urine and feces on the memorial plaques. The location of this building is away from public view and provides an opportunity for negative activity to go on unchecked. The area often attracts individuals who are homeless for sheltering purposes and also allows substance users to use with privacy. Audit participants voiced concern over the lack of safety caused by people who are under the influence of drugs in the area. The museum operator has found over 400 needles in the park right next to the museum property.



Throughout the years, break-ins to the museum building have cost about \$35,000, and the need for gates and bars on the doors and windows has cost an additional \$14,000<sup>1</sup>. The security challenges of the area have been exacerbated by the construction of the new hotel. The current construction dissuades people from accessing the museum or using the walk way. The museum has also been impacted by COVID pandemic. Finally, the steps leading up to Cameron Way from Front Street has posed some safety risks. This stairwell is hidden from view and during the evening has some lighting which makes the area attractive to those looking for a place to be and needing light to do their activities. The stairs are usually blocked at the bottom with shopping carts and debris and drug paraphernalia as well as human waste is found on the stairs. Fires have also been started on these steps. This stairway is often used by seniors and general pedestrians for the quickest way into the downtown core from Front Street and the water's edge.

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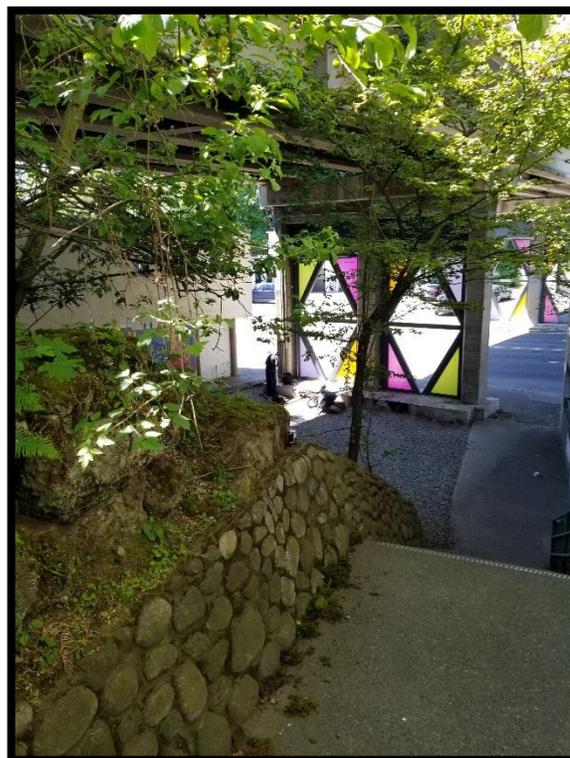
<sup>1</sup> These figures were provided to the audit group by the security personnel operating the Military Museum.

### *Commercial Street (Location #6)*

It's important to note that although the downtown core has faced safety challenges over the last few years, the COVID pandemic has exacerbated these safety challenges. The closures of businesses or limited hours in the downtown core has meant that less people are coming to the downtown area for business and leisure activities. This has created dead zones where there is no natural surveillance happening and has allowed for the anonymity of unwanted users of the space. The audit participants have noted Diana Krall plaza, once a bustling place of markets, entertainment and positive activity has turned into a place of tents, shopping carts, drug use and drug deals. It was noted that there were very limited areas for homeless individuals to go and this made the plaza a viable place to shelter since there is no entity taking charge of the space. There was also special mention of some problematic areas surrounding the Vancouver Island Conference Centre where drug use and selling was prevalent. Audit participants pointed out some problematic landscaping and open platforms that supported drug activity or loitering at Gordon Street and Terminal Avenue. Participants discussed their desires to bring the night markets back and to fill up the empty spaces and platforms with public art.

### *Bastion Street to Wallace Street (Location #7)*

The Bastion Street parkade has faced a high number of thefts from vehicle incidents. Taking a quick stroll around the parkade, notes from vehicle owners can be found indicating that there are no valuables left in the car. This illustrates the common occurrences of theft in this parkade. Audit participants felt that recently this area has been quieter with the enhanced security measures being provided by the City. They also noted that the porta potty here in this location didn't seem to have in impact on the area and was generally used as intended, unlike other porta potties placed throughout the downtown area. Finally, the area under the Bastion Street bridge (at Terminal Avenue) was noted as problematic. Businesses have had to fence off access to their properties from this area and the City has had to recently review the structural elements of the bridge as there was concern that structures were compromised due to the encampment activity that is happening under the bridge.



The same encampment activity was said to be happening by the audit participants along the Wallace Street embankments. There was some discussion around the warming centre that was located on Wallace Street. There were some concerns by the business owners about the parking of shopping carts while folks were using the warming centre. The carts sometime blocked the sidewalk and there was concern by individuals using the carts to store personal items that their property would be stolen while they were accessing the warming centre.

#### *Albert Street to Selby Street (Location #8)*

As we travelled west on Albert Street, discussions centred again on the fires that were happening downtown. Some of these fires are started in dumpsters or items are being removed from the dumpsters and used as fuel for the fires. There were many examples of overflowing and unlocked dumpster bins in this area.



Travelling up Albert Street audit participants pointed out various empty lots. This supported a feeling of vacancy and was exacerbated by the empty parking lots on the north side of Albert Street. The lots had overgrown landscape however at the time did not have any appearances of vandalism, loitering or drug use. The area was quiet as the audit was conducted.

The last leg of the audit wrapped up on Selby Street as the group headed back to Nob Hill Park. The evening had set in and it was evident that the lighting in this area was very limited. Travelling as a pedestrian up the hill along Selby made many uncomfortable as the sidewalks and road ways were dark and any visibility was further limited by the crest on the hill. Other safety concerns were not raised along Selby Street.

#### *Other Observations and Comments*

A reoccurring theme of safety concerns that residents and businesses of the neighbourhood shared was the high drug use in the area and the population of individuals with mental health issues in the area. The downtown businesses and residents felt both passionate and frustrated about their community, and had

feelings of helplessness when it came to addressing the drugs and crime in their area. As mentioned previously, there is no doubt that the COVID pandemic has heavily impacted the downtown area not only in economic terms but in safety terms. This is causing a heavy burden as they struggle to keep their business going while trying to provide security options that have further financial implications.

## Crime Statistics Summary

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The Uniformed Crime Reporting Survey (UCR) is a tool developed to measure the frequency at which various crimes and other activities occur in our communities. UCR data, when taken alongside other indicators, can provide valuable information to police, community organizations, and other agencies about the ways in which neighbourhoods are affected by crime. UCR statistics for the Downtown core neighbourhood were provided by the Nanaimo RCMP. The report contains measurements about the frequency of various incidents from January of 2016 to March of 2021. This information can offer useful insights into the experiences of Downtown residents.

A strong increase can be seen in the table below for the number of total reported incidents across the 5 year UCR reporting period. A total of 223 incidents were reported in 2016 and 286 were reported in 2017. This figure then rose to 622 in 2018, 869 in 2019, and 927 in 2020. Although these increases in total incidents is significant, it should be acknowledged that these numbers do not necessarily indicate the real totals of an increase in actual rates of crime. This is the case because UCR statistics include both incidents of actual crime, as well as incidents where a crime was suspected to have occurred. Beyond this, the UCR changed its methodology for categorizing incidents during the reporting period presented. As of January 2019, all incidents are considered to be “founded”, and are included in the report, unless a police investigation has found credible evidence demonstrating that the incident did not happen, or was never attempted. This change was made to ensure the UCR respected the experiences of victims, and avoided excluding legitimate incidents even though investigation did not provide evidence. As a result, many incidents which may have been excluded prior to 2019 are now likely to be added to the reported figures.

The category of incidents which saw the sharpest rise in frequency across the reporting window are those of Other General Occurrences (Other GO<sup>2</sup>) and Suspicious Occurrences (SO). Only 17 Other GO incidents were reported in 2016 and 2017, but there were 123 in 2018, 176 in 2019, and 236 in 2020. Similarly, 93% of reported SO incidents occurred in 2019 and 2020. These dramatic increases are likely the result of changes in the categorization methods of the UCR as well as increases to the actual number of incidents. There was also a notable rise in the frequency of Municipal Bylaw incidents. The first quarter of 2021 illustrates that Bylaw Incidents are already at 64% of the 5-year average in the first 3

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<sup>2</sup> Other General Occurrences include reports that pertain to Well-Being Checks, the Trespass Act, the Quarantine Act, Lost Property, the Safe Streets Act, etc.

months. Mischief to Property also became more frequent in the latter years of the reporting window, with 74% of incidents being reported in 2018, 2019, and 2020. There seems to be an increase in general Public Disorder type incidents.

Theft from Vehicle, and Break and Enters, occurred at mostly consistent rates across the 5 year reporting window, with no trends being readily visible in the UCR data. Incidents Causing Disturbances although at high rates also has a fairly consistent rate. Incidents of theft under \$5000 occurred at a mostly consistent rate, though there was a notable drop in 2020, which may be a consequence of the restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. More serious crimes such as Robbery, and Theft over \$5000 were very rare across the reporting window. Arson was also low across the board however it is noted that there are increased incidents of Arson happening in the downtown core in the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter of 2021 but aren't illustrated in this reporting time frame. Finally, Shoplifting and Auto Theft illustrates a downward trend in the 5 year range of statistics.

DOWNTOWN	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	5year Trend	5year Average	Jan-Mar 2021
TOTAL	223	286	622	869	927		585	177
ARSON	1	0	0	1	1		1	0
AUTO THEFT	5	4	8	4	3		5	1
BIKE THEFT	8	11	9	10	5		9	0
BREAK & ENTER - BUS	11	7	12	13	6		10	2
BREAK & ENTER - OTH	1	2	1	2	1		1	0
BREAK & ENTER - RES	1	3	1	6	1		2	1
CAUSE DISTURBANCE	79	104	128	114	108		107	22
COUNTERFEIT CURRENCY	5	1	1	7	1		3	0
FRAUDS	5	7	16	16	14		12	2
MISCHIEF TO PROPERTY	37	50	82	70	98		67	21
MUNICIPAL BYLAW	0	1	88	141	142		74	47
OTHER GO	6	11	136	173	236		112	24
OTHER THEFT O/5000	0	0	0	1	0		0	0
OTHER THEFT U/5000	25	27	31	37	20		28	3
POSSESS STOLEN PROPERTY	5	5	3	5	5		5	4
PUBLIC MISCHIEF	0	1	2	1	0		1	0
ROBBERY	1	0	2	2	3		2	0
SHOPLIFTING	9	8	14	8	5		9	1
SUSPICIOUS OCCURRENCES	1	2	32	203	243		96	41
THEFT FROM MAIL	n/a	n/a	n/a	0	2		-	1
THEFT FROM VEHICLE	23	42	56	55	33		42	7

# Crime Prevention and Community Safety Recommendations

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The purpose of the Neighbourhood Safety Audits is to support local neighbourhoods in building resiliency and increase safety. Work is done by activating the neighbourhood by capturing their real lived experiences through tools such as the pre audit survey, the group audits and/or self-directed audits. Engagement of the neighbourhood is important to help co create safety and connect agencies that can provide support in developing and carrying out community safety initiatives or appropriate crime prevention activities.

Crime and community safety issues are complex and are often a symptom of a lack of access to the social determinants of health for not only individuals but neighbourhoods and communities. The root causes of crime are often the results of adverse social, economic, cultural and family conditions (Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council, 1996). The recommendations made here are suggestions on activities that neighbourhoods can do to contribute to the overall safety and security of the neighbourhood. They do not guarantee that crime will never happen as a result of implementing these recommendations nor will the following recommendations solve complex problems such as homelessness, the opioid crisis or the lack of resources around mental health services.

## *Downtown Neighbourhood Recommendations:*

1. The Downtown Neighbourhood has several organized groups that include Neighbourhood Associations, block watches and Business Associations. This has allowed a variety of networks to form. Having relationships with neighbours and other businesses is a positive indicator for increasing neighbourhood safety. These networks can be used as a resource to improve conditions in neighbourhoods especially if they form a collaborative approach. Working together, all types of positive activity events can be generated. For instance, with the return of the Nanaimo Downtown Business Improvement Association, events such as the downtown night markets can be held downtown again and can include areas hardest hit like Diana Krall Plaza or Victoria Crescent. Community Policing can provide volunteer support to these types of events in order to promote community safety. Working relationships between the business associations will also be helpful in communicating safety concerns and ensuring that activity happening in one business area will positively influence the other neighbouring business areas.

Neighbourhood Associations, like the Neighbours of Nob Hill Society, can focus on hosting block and/or work parties. Consider hosting regular block or work parties several times a year in areas of the neighbourhood that might need some clean up or beatification. Hosting a block party in

the hardest hit areas may help to alleviate the effects of the Broken Window Theory<sup>3</sup>. These types of events also support relationship building between residents and can reach other residents who are not currently involved in neighbourhood through the association or block watches. There are several options that may cover the costs, for instance, the City of Nanaimo often provides social planning grants that support projects that build community and social connectivity. The Nanaimo Foundation also provides Neighbourhood grants to help build safer communities. These grants can cover supplies and food for events. Community Policing can provide the support of additional volunteers to help with painting and/or garbage pickup and provide Anti-Graffiti Kits. Always ensure you have the permission of the property owner prior to conducting any clean up events or block parties. It's always a good idea to reach out to the municipality to let them know about your plan and if there is any protocols or regulations that might apply to the area you are looking to clean up or host your block party at.

2. Other active Neighbourhood Associations in Nanaimo actively support events in their local neighbourhood parks and utilize a variety of grant funding to do so. For instance, the Harewood Neighbourhood Association applies for Summer Job funding to host summer programming for families and children at the Harewood Centennial park. The Old City Neighbourhood Association hosts Family Movie Nights in their local park. Nanaimo has a great network of Neighbourhood Associations where connections, support and information can be provided. Many neighbourhoods share similar challenges and each can share best practices with the network on what worked in their area. If not already, consider connecting with the Nanaimo Neighbourhood Association Network.
3. Actively encourage new block watches in the residential areas of the downtown neighbourhood. Invite Cst. Gary O'Brien to annual Neighbourhood Association meetings and/or Business Association meetings to promote and support the implementations of new block watches within the neighbourhood.
4. Community Policing can provide educational opportunities to business associations on topics such as Loss Prevention, Fraud, Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design and other business related crime. This can help better inform individual businesses on how they can implement crime prevention measures.
5. Support businesses in the downtown area especially those businesses hardest hit with safety challenges to complete a Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) assessment

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<sup>3</sup> The Broken Window Theory, defined by social scientists James Wilson and George Kelling in 1982, as any visible sign of disorder including graffiti in a neighbourhood will encourage further disorder and misbehaviour leading to more serious community safety issues. The more the space is in disarray the more the message is sent that no one cares for the space and therefore the space is "free" for the taking. For instance, in high crime neighbourhoods in Philadelphia there was an initiative to repair abandoned properties and transform vacant lots into community parks which subsequently saw the reduction of gun violence by 39% (Psychology Today Canada, 2021)

on their property. Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) incorporates a set of strategies that help to reduce the opportunities to commit crimes, reduce the fear of crime, and prevents negative activity by replacing it with generators of positive activity (International CPTED Association, 2020). CPTED is grounded in practical and theoretical knowledge primarily from the fields of criminology, sociology, psychology, and architectural design. Community Policing can provide this assessment free of charge and work with businesses to make improvements. Municipalities are seeing the value in this type of crime prevention programming to help revitalize their downtown areas. For example in Campbell River, City Council is using a specific focus on CPTED projects by providing funding to support the cost of the CPTED assessments and any CPTED focused improvements on properties (City of Campbell River, 2021). These assessments can include a look at the property's waste management bins and recommendations can be made to improve the security of these bins and prevent dumpster fires or the use of materials for fire fuel. *\*Note Community Policing is currently working with businesses on dumpster fire prevention and one large property owner is currently in the process of completing a CPTED assessment for their property.*

6. Knowledge around who to call and when to call to report criminal or nuisance activity is very helpful in proactively addressing safety issues. Reporting all incidents of suspicious, criminal or nuisance activity help to bring awareness to the problems happening in the neighbourhood and can directly protect family, neighbours and business owners. Many individuals hesitate to call the police or the local municipality out of fear of getting involved, sounding overly suspicious, taking up scarce resources or they may fear being identified. Only residents and business owners in a neighbourhood know who or what stands out in your neighbourhood so this is a critical part of crime prevention. There are several ways and points of contacts to make reports so this can be confusing to residents. It is encouraged that all residents and businesses in the Downtown Neighbourhood receive the appropriate information via digital or physical resources. Community Policing can work with the City of Nanaimo to deliver the "Who to Call and When to Call" pamphlets to Downtown residents. Information can also be shared around what types of details are needed to share with departments such as police, bylaw, sanitation, at Neighbourhood Association or Block Watch meetings.
7. Community Policing will implement regular Crime Watch patrols throughout the Downtown Neighbourhood to increase their presence and provide additional "eyes" and "ears" for the neighbourhood. Crime Watch Patrols will focus on the areas noted most problematic, around the downtown core, especially Victoria Road, Cavan Street, Front Street, Commercial Street, Skinner Street, Cameron Road, and Nob Hill Park. The Community Policing Volunteer Program hosts almost 50 dedicated and caring volunteers. They report all suspicious, criminal and nuisance behaviour they observe. Patrol teams are trained to keep notes and maintain contact with RCMP dispatch, City Bylaws and City Sanitation as needed via cell phone and GIS Mapping systems.

### *Opportunities for Change:*

1. The feedback collected on the online surveys and audits included a desire to have the return of the Community Policing Station on Victoria Crescent but more specifically the Nanaimo Downtown Ambassador Program<sup>4</sup> established in 2006. The program provided 2 full time patrollers and 2-part time patrollers 6 days a week. The patrollers were trained to be non-confrontational and provide good will safety patrol services and tourist information. The patrollers were very well respected by the business community, the residents and individuals who were homeless. The patrollers provided support to all groups and were liaisons with downtown business owners, Bylaw services and the RCMP Bike Unit. Survey respondents and audit participants felt that safety was greatly improved with the ambassadors. The success of the Ambassador Program was also attributed to the support the RCMP Bike Unit provided. These types of initiatives have been evaluated by Public Safety Canada and the National Institute of Justice in the United States. The City of Vancouver has a downtown safety ambassador program operated by the local business improvement association. They provide a visible street presence within the downtown area and identify and report safety hazards, vandalism and graffiti, crime related incidents, illegal behaviour and business concerns. They provide services such as Safe Walk and assist with quality of life concerns for marginalized individuals. (Downtown Vancouver Business Improvement Association, 2021). The more presence of police or ambassador type officers is desired by the downtown neighbourhood. Unfortunately, the current capacity and resources of the Nanaimo RCMP Bike Unit is stretched and the rising demands of the homelessness and opioid crisis<sup>4</sup> has made it challenging to fill the needs of the neighbourhood. An Ambassador Program can help support these needs identified by the neighbourhood and the businesses.
2. Another common theme that resonated through the audit and online survey is the general perception that the downtown area is dangerous. One university student engaged in the project remarked that he lived in Nanaimo all his life and that he had only gone downtown a handful of times because he was always told it was unsafe. The stigma associated with the downtown area not only impacts our downtown area economically but actually perpetuates challenges with community safety. A negative reputation means that less people will come downtown and that reduces safety by limiting natural surveillance and a general sense of care and ownership of the space. This increases instances of crime and public disorder. The COVID pandemic has added to this challenge. The City of Nanaimo and the new Nanaimo Downtown Business Improvement Association has implemented some creative, COVID friendly ways of bringing more positive, healthy activity to the downtown area by promoting scavenger hunts, pop up musicians, and improvements to infrastructure, for example, the bike lanes on Front

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<sup>4</sup> Established in 2006 and ran successfully for a number of years. This program was based on successful crime prevention model in Regina, SK (City of Nanaimo, 2006).

Street. This work will have to continue and be supported by a communication strategy that will invite and encourage more intended users to the Downtown Neighbourhood.

3. A common challenge plaguing urban centres and mid-size cities like Nanaimo are the number of vacant properties in neighbourhoods. Vacant properties in neighbourhoods can create financial strain through a variety of ways, decreased tax revenue, maintenance costs, and costs through increased safety and crime issues (Mallach, 2018). Vacant lots also create a blight in a neighbourhood often lowering the value of properties nearby. This phenomenon now coined Hyper-Vacancy<sup>5</sup> correlates in neighbourhoods with concentrated poverty, unemployment and health problems. Vacant lands or buildings are often associated with physical disorder, and ties true to the Broken Window Theory mentioned previously. Vacant lots indicate a lack of control within neighbourhoods and these types of environments are subject to criminal activity, prostitution, drug use and the sale of drugs. There are a number of vacant lots that have posed problems in the Downtown Neighbourhood. There are several empty lots along the audit route for the Downtown Neighbourhood creating urban dead zones within this particular neighbourhood. There are several cities across Canada and in the United States where municipalities are looking for ways to address these vacant lots. Municipalities and neighbourhoods have created pocket parks, food forests, or created affordable housing and shelter options through expropriation and Use It or Lose It type bylaws (Mallach, 2018). More utilization of the City of Nanaimo's current Property Maintenance Bylaw and the Nuisance Abatement and Cost Recovery Bylaw may help to further engage property owners to maintain and manage properties better or be charged the costs for the City to attend and clean up properties. A closer look needs to be taken at vacant lots and how policy and planning can help revitalize neighbourhoods and move them away from a tipping point. *\*This report acknowledges the recent purchase of several empty lots in the downtown area by the City of Nanaimo for the purposes of revitalization.*
4. Many nonprofit organizations offering services to our most marginalized individuals are very interested in building relationships with residents and businesses. After all they are providing service in the neighbourhood and many of the clients they serve are residents of the neighbourhood whether housed or not. Residents living in supported living or housing sites also care about the neighbourhood they live in. This is evident in some of the relationships businesses are building with individuals who are homeless, using shelter or supportive housing services. For instance, one downtown business has hired an individual who is homeless to clean up and do odd jobs around his restaurant in exchange for pay and meals. This type of arrangement is mutually beneficial and gives marginalized individuals a sense of belonging and purpose and pride in meeting some of their own basic needs. Relationship building between groups in the neighbourhood such as neighbourhood associations, block watches, shelter

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<sup>5</sup> Defined in a submission by Alan Mallach where neighbourhoods have vacant buildings or lots comprising more than 20% of the building stock. (Mallach, 2018)

organizations, nonprofit agencies and businesses are important. By sharing different perspectives on what challenges people are facing in their neighbourhood these challenges can be better addressed. This collaboration and relationship building also needs to happen at the grassroots level and not just with the executives of associations or government. Best practices show that when marginalized individuals living in a neighbourhood have a sense of belonging they are more likely to contribute to the neighbourhood in positive ways.

5. Another concern of the Downtown Neighbourhood as with many neighbourhoods is the public disorder correlated with the drug, mental health, homelessness and housing crisis. Many residents are concerned with the lack of housing, and support services for individuals with mental health and addictions issues. The public disorder causes fear among the residents and many are worried that the lack of housing and the pressures of moving homeless individuals from one location to another in the downtown area will put additional pressures on the surrounding neighbourhoods. Linkages and collaboration between neighbourhoods and the Nanaimo Homeless Coalition will be key in getting community support and the resources the Coalition may need to carry out their Action Plan. Partnerships such as these also help to tackle stigma and correct any harmful myths with evidence based research on what is working to address homelessness and our current drug and mental health crisis'.

## Summary

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The general sense of those engaged in the project relay the potential the Downtown Neighbourhood has to be a major destination point. Residents and businesses love the proximity to the water, and the economic opportunities of being close to major transportation hubs, such as the ferry. One survey respondent states, "It could be so awesome! All the elements are right there, water, hills, weather, walkability". As with all downtown cores, there is a general desire to be close to the amenities and the infrastructure the downtown has to offer. The residents and businesses talk about the positive relationships they have with other residents and businesses. The concern residents and businesses show around community safety is apparent with the level of engagement in the Neighbourhood Safety Audit project. 258 individuals were directly involved in the project through the online survey or the audits. Nanaimo Community Policing is looking forward to supporting the Downtown Neighbourhood in their efforts with the crime prevention programming recommended. It would be very beneficial to revisit the Downtown Neighbourhood again in 2 to 3 years to see what crime prevention programs have been implemented and what positive impacts have been made in the neighbourhood.

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# Appendix A

## Downtown Neighbourhood Route Map

~Start and Finish at Nob Hill Park

- 1) Cut through the park towards Hecate and Robarts Street.
- 2) Take the steps down to Cavan Street (Stop 1)
- 3) Turn Right on Cavan Street and head towards Victoria Crescent.
- 4) Turn Left on Victoria Crescent and head towards Esplanade (Stop 2)
- 5) Cross the Island Highway and continue on Esplanade towards Front Street and by the transit interchange (Stop 3)
- 6) Continue down Front Street and use the cross walk to the stairs leading up to Cameron Street. Head up the stairs towards the Military Museum (Stop 4)
- 7) Continue down Cameron Street, turn right on Terminal Avenue and than turn right on Commercial Street (Stop 5)
- 8) Walk North up Commercial Street towards Bastion Street. Turn Left on Bastion Street (Stop 6 @Bastion and Skinner)
- 9) Walk up Bastion to Wallace Street, turn Left. Walk down towards Commercial and turn Right on Albert Street (Stop 7)
- 10) Head up Albert to Selby Street (Stop 8)
- 11) Turn left on Selby Street and finish at Nob Hill Park.

