

## Rats a true health risk on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, homeless advocate says

Co-ordinator of city-sponsored market backs findings in report by UBC researcher despite doubts of medical health officer

BY KENT SPENCER, THE PROVINCE, JANUARY 27, 2016



Pedestrian activity outside the Downtown Eastside Market in Vancouver, BC., January 26, 2016.

**Photograph by:** NICK PROCAYLO , PNG

The co-ordinator of the Vancouver Street Market agrees with a UBC researcher that rats are a threat to human health on the Downtown Eastside.

Roland Clarke, who works among the homeless on Hastings Street, said hundreds of rats “run around like crazy” once the sun goes down.

“Rat feces get spread around. It’s impossible to keep surfaces clean. You can’t touch the ground. It’s a very serious health issue,” said Clarke, who supports the findings of a report released recently by Chelsea Himsworth, an assistant professor at UBC.

The report, on research done for the Vancouver Rat Project, said the furry rodents carry more disease-causing bacteria than was previously known.

She said these bacteria include E coli, the superbug MRSA and a potentially fatal fever called leptospirosis.

“People should be worried,” said Himsworth, adding said the risk is especially acute on the Downtown Eastside, where 725 rats were captured for the study. “The homeless are individuals with reduced health status, which makes them more vulnerable.”

Himsworth’s warning was dismissed by Dr. Reka Gustafson, medical officer for Vancouver Coastal Health, who said there are no known cases of rat-transmitted sickness in Metro Vancouver.

“There are multiple issues with being under-housed on the streets. Exposure to rats is not the most important one,” Gustafson said.

“With limited resources, we must focus on things that we know matter.”

Clarke said the street market, located at 62 East Hastings, occupied dirt-covered ground until the City of Vancouver — a major sponsor — agreed to have it paved so rats couldn’t burrow underground.

The market provides a chance for vendors, many of whom live on the streets, to sell crafts and other items.

Max Michaluk, a security guard at the market’s front entrance, said rat activity gears up when humans depart for the night.

“You’ll hear them rustling all over the place,” Michaluk said. “A nearby restaurant dumps grease and chicken bones. It’s a heyday for them.”

Staff tries to keep up with the droppings by sweeping them up; rain washes away the sharp odour of the animals’ urine.

Michaluk said he has never seen a rat-catcher in his entire life on the Downtown Eastside.

“It’s always somebody else’s problem,” he said.

Clarke, whose background includes a PhD in physics, said officials don’t try harder because “it’s poor people.”

“The city needs to pay more attention, because it could blow up to be an enormous health issue,” he said.