

## STREET SMARTS

Central Memorial Park in Downtown Calgary. Refurbished in 2011



Nuit Blanche 2016 showed how enjoyable the park can be. It had overcome its reputation as a drug market and become a place where people gathered to enjoy Calgary's beautiful downtown.

Since the Safe Consumption Site opened across the street, the picture has changed. It's reverted. There are some big events but people don't bring their kids there very often



### The Broken Window

We got the call at 10am on a Sunday. The break in (and I do mean break) had been witnessed by a few people walking by, and they'd phoned it in to the police. I was already heading downtown as I'd received a call from our security service. I was thinking false alarm when I received a call from the police. The constable reported to me that someone had broken a front window.

There was a hole 30cm in diameter punched through two panes of glass. Shattered glass was spread on the sidewalk and the floor of the store. One of the book holders was empty. We never did figure out which book was stolen but the average price of a book is \$25. The price of a new window was \$1,400.

Some staff came in and started to clean up the broken glass while we looked at the security video with the police constables. A lady appears from the northwest side of our intersection. When she gets to our side of the street she turns towards the window display. She withdraws a sawed-off golf club from her jacket, and hits the window. She reaches in and grabs a book and puts it into her jacket. This is all hard to see as the camera was located near the south end of our building, but it's very definite what is happening. She did this in full view of two or three passersby and walked around the corner onto 13th Avenue as if hoping no one would notice.

When I look back, I feel I was mentally unprepared. The way things have changed, I should have phoned in the alarm right away. We're not adapting fast enough to this new reality. The police made an identification because the person had been creating a disturbance at the SCS and they were able to lay charges. The CPS constables were both sympathetic and extremely helpful in guiding us through dealing with this incident. I can't help thinking of what would have happened if the lady with the club had hit a human being instead of a window.





### Visibility

A big problem with people hanging out at the SCS is the way they block the sidewalks. Some people are shy about barging through and access to the medical centre is impeded.

**Pandora Street** in Victoria: Their safe injection site is in the centre of this picture; it's much less noticeable than Calgary's

The clients have a place off the street to gather - and it's supervised! - Probably three times as many clients as Calgary but far less visibility.





## What's ahead for 4th St. / Beltline ? - Vacant Buildings



The other side of Pandora:

The drug pushers drive other businesses out because they attract a large number of addicts. The addicts then take over doorways and parking lots.

The first victim in Calgary is the "Provision" restaurant which is located in the park. A couple of years ago there was a gap of a few weeks when Provision took ownership. Street people, including pushers took over the space immediately.



Leads to this :

East Hastings - the largest outdoor drug market in the world !

1,000 people on the street; eight blocks plus side streets. Vancouver is "Treading Water" when it comes to dealing with the drug crisis. Once again the atmosphere is characterized by vacant buildings.

## Crutches

I was shovelling the sidewalk one morning. We'd had a snow clearing contractor, a street person whom we employed part-time for 4 years. That contract had ended unfortunately before we'd been able to arrange a new one. So, there I was; hat, toque, and scarf, on the morning of a surprise snowstorm.

A young woman had walked up behind me. She was wearing a white coat, the entire front of which was stained with blood. She was walking on crutches. In a situation like that the question is, do you phone 911 or the non-emergency line. She wasn't threatening anyone. She was begging.

I chose non-emergency and the police were glad of it. There was a snowstorm on. Probably five other people phoned that morning and on into the afternoon as the bloodied woman hobbled around 4th street and the surrounding neighbourhood. I talked to some of those people on the street. There was a rumour that she was carrying a razor blade. For about five hours this lady was the focus of our day. Same for the Calgary Police Service, or at least one constable who made numerous attempts to reason with the lady and hospitalize her. He also phoned me back to explain the blood. She was scratching the sores on her skin - induced by crystal meth.

She's still out there. I often see her at night, shouting out her pain in a hoarse cry. Pushing down the street on her crutches. Who would be giving her the drugs ?

Calgary's SCS was started in response to the opioid crisis but it now appears that downtown the problem is Methamphetamines. We're wondering if there is such thing as a "safe injection" for these kind of drugs; they're poison.



## One on One rescue

## The Box In the Back

The police pulled over to the sidewalk as they had many times for the girl on crutches.

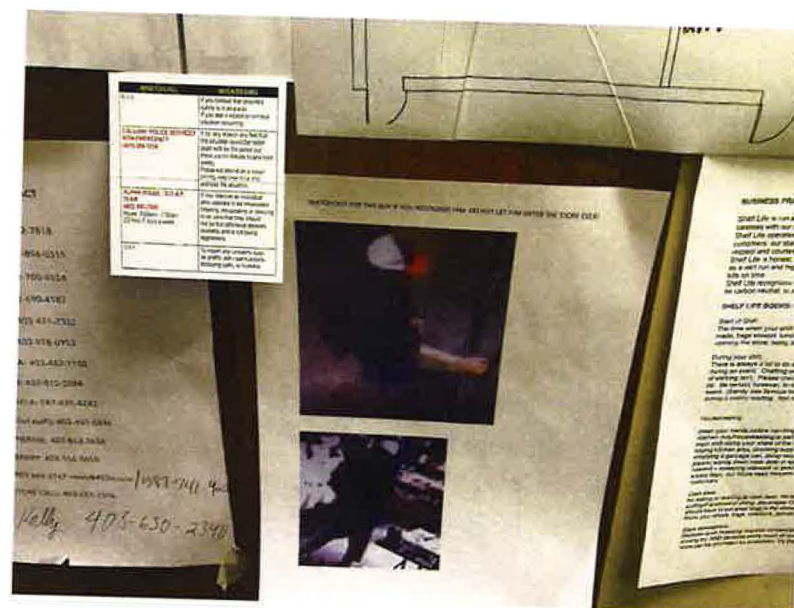
Probably someone had phoned on it. I was watching with C. from the store. In a lot of cases a victim of drugs will go along to Alpha House (a dry-out centre) with the police or the DOAP team (a street agency that picks up distressed individuals off the street). It's temporary but effective. This lady had refused many times before, but this time they almost got her to come along.

When they opened the back doors of the van there was a metal box inside that you could crawl into and lie down sideways. I wouldn't gotten in there and the girl didn't either. The police are equipped and trained to arrest people, not calm a disturbed and rattled mind.

There seems to be no clear path to saving people from addiction on the street. The SCS is blunting rescue attempts, operating in an insular fashion and ignoring the consequences of legitimizing drug use.

We can't do it either.

We're not equipped: "Now we need bio-hazard training in order to be booksellers" ...as stated by one of our staff members. Here's our procedures bulletin board; who to phone, what to do and a picture of a bad actor. This fellow has a needle in his arm, right in the store.



Here's our instructions to the staff: From the SAFETY section of our Procedures Manual

- locked washrooms
- Plus: clean and disinfect the washrooms if there's an incident.
- 2 staff - on the floor at all times.
- tolerate shoplifting \$8,000 per year
- phone 311 - remove abandoned shopping carts
- phone DOAP for addiction upsets and people who appear disoriented,
- phone non-emergency: - people who won't leave, people who are unconscious. The call centre will convert to a 911 if necessary. If they're busy - phone 911.
- phone 911 if there's blood, violence, robbery
- wear vinyl gloves when necessary.
- two people visible when confronting addicts
- keep your cell phone handy.

These tasks generate a large expense in themselves and distract us from doing our jobs. We have less money available for staff at a time when they are operating in a siege atmosphere. Shelf Life Books has had to install a \$7,000 security monitoring system.

### Crazy Guy's Hat

Sometimes it's hard to tell which unwelcome behaviour is due to opioids, methamphetamines, old-style drugs like heroin, or severe mental illness. There was one fellow who scared me a bit - he was so wildly incoherent.

He was sitting in our comfy chair in the store, sorting through his suitcase and having trouble with the broken zipper. A. was on the non-emergency line while I went around and warned the customers, and assured them that we were paying attention. This situation called for patience so the luggage sorting went on a while. The police were asking for details - A. gave them a basic description and asked me if there were any distinguishing features. I reported a missing finger and they asked which hand that would be. It was the right hand and they asked which finger. Realizing the customers were overhearing the conversation I silently waved the ring finger on my right hand. A. was a bit stumped as to what I tried to convey but realized it was the ring finger and no, it wasn't bleeding and I went back and attempted conversation.

We were getting nowhere until he pulled on a bright white toque with knitted tassels hanging down. As he turned his head from side to side the tassels snapped into his face causing even more confusion. Finally his gaze rested on me. "Does it look okay?"

"It looks great!" I said. He jumped up happily, jammed full his suitcase, smiled at us and headed out the door. So, one more phone call to call off the emergency and we were done in less than an hour. The police call center is great at getting an accurate picture of a confusing situation and it's good to have them on the line in case things do go south.





### 3 Positive Suggestions:

**Lockers** - The picture on the left is the United Church on East Hastings; Their lock-up facilities help to reduce theft and therefore depression.

**Police Presence** Make it difficult to entice vulnerable people into an open air drug market. Report every incident, every time.

**Decentralize** - Find the best places to do this work and measure the effect on the communities. Improve access to intervention and recovery.

Plus: **"Housing First"**- At the root of harm reduction there is the need for Recovery Programs. Recovery is nearly impossible without some form of shelter or housing.