

Official study of 2010 Olympics finds it difficult to measure boons, busts

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By Stephanie Levitz, The Canadian Press

VANCOUVER, B.C. - Neither the dire warnings nor the spectacular promises that come with hosting an Olympics can be proved, says a new study from the University of British Columbia - at least not until the gold medals have been handed out and the Games have moved on.

The majority of data analysed for the second volume of the official Games impact study was inconclusive about whether the 2010 Winter Games is having either positive or negative effects on the Vancouver and Whistler, B.C., regions, researchers said in their report released Friday.

What results there were showed some benefits for economic growth and sport development so far, but in controversial areas like effects on housing and the environment, the results were unclear.

"What this means is that as a research group, we were not confident in the data that we were gathering, so in order to be more conservative, to play it safe, we did not roll these up into our assessment of the overall impact," said Rob VanWynsberghe, the lead researcher from the University of British Columbia.

The study looked at data from 2002 to 2006 and is the second of four studies being done by UBC on behalf of the Vancouver organizing committee. The next volume will be published in 2010 and the final report in 2013.

Such extensive monitoring is a new requirement of the International Olympic Committee and if the early results don't show much either way, that's fine by the IOC.

The point of the study is for the Games to stop being held up as either Santa or Scrooge for host regions without actual proof, said Gilbert Felli, the executive director of Games for the IOC.

"When people are saying the Games are no good because it brings only bad things, you like to understand if it's true or not true," he said in an interview.

"On the contrary, we don't want to be the people to be over optimistic and say ah, if you've got the Games it will bring you this and that. By monitoring we have a better picture of what are the Games."

Vancouver Olympic organizers said they were pleased with the results. They noted that the data used comes from a period of time where they didn't have too much going on.

"The indicators that they used for many of the data points are very high-level indicators that involved B.C.-wide and Canadian-wide data," said Linda Coady, vice-president of sustainability for the organizing committee.

"The chances that our activities were going to effect provincial and national indicators at that scale, in that phase, were not high."

One of the challenges of the study, however, is figuring out what the Games can affect and what it can't.

Critics have long claimed the Games are forcing people out of their homes in B.C. and leading to the demolition of social housing units as the city spruces up poorer areas for an international audience.

The rate of homelessness in Vancouver doubled between 2002 and 2005 and researchers found the increase in shelter space didn't meet demand.

But can that be blamed on the Olympics?

"Specifically, we cannot discern whether the increase in homelessness is due to individuals in Vancouver/Metro Vancouver being displaced and becoming homeless, or due to an in-surge of homeless into Vancouver/Metro Vancouver from other parts of Canada (which in itself may or may not be caused by the upcoming Games)," the report said.

"These data constraints make it difficult for us to control for alternative explanations."

On the other hand, the Games promised to "green" the Vancouver region. Researchers found that greenhouse gas emissions did, in fact, decrease, along with water consumption.

"These trends are likely to have existed even in the absence of the 2010 Games," said the report. "Therefore it is difficult to isolate potential Games impacts on these trends."

VanWynsberghe said he'd like to see the research lead to accountability for the promises made by bid committees.

He said cities should not be awarded the Games if they don't build into their bid some recourse if they don't meet sustainability goals.

"I believe that if we do this work well, we will see an International Olympic Committee that makes decisions about who hosts based on (Olympic Games Impact Study) criteria," he said.

Felli said that's not in the cards, but he suggested the IOC would consider changing the way it handles the Games if the results showed major negative impacts.

"You always have to read the message given to you by the public, the media or scientific research," he said.

"According to what you receive in return, you must adapt yourself so then you go to a better direction."

The study requires researchers to analyse 126 different indicators looking at everything from traffic congestion to the amount of open-air leisure space.

"What we would like to suggest is that the Games impacts in the social sphere occur in advance of the event, we also believe that the environmental impacts are going to happen during the event themselves," said VanWynsberghe.

"We would suggest that the economic impacts follow the Games."

Olympic organizers are paying \$300,000 towards the study, with UBC covering another \$300,000.

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