



RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Research Highlight No. 19
July 2007

DOES PANHANDLING PROVIDE A LIVING

Introduction

Panhandlers in Winnipeg seem to have been growing in number in recent years, but little is known about their characteristics and life circumstances. Does panhandling provide a living? Are all of the negative comments, the diminished self-esteem, and the verbal and physical abuse worth it? We need to know more about panhandlers if we want to address the issues that lead people to panhandle.

This research highlight draws on the findings of interviews with 75 panhandlers conducted for the study *Panhandling In Winnipeg: Legislation vs. Support Services*. It provides information on panhandlers' earnings from panhandling activity and other sources and whether their income is enough to cover their basic necessities. The larger study also examines methods of and reasons for panhandling, geographic distribution of the activity in the city, the way panhandlers spend their money, their housing circumstances and their use of supportive services.

How Much Do Panhandlers Earn?

When asked how much they earn, 70% of those who responded reported getting less than two dollars from each donor, another 20% said they received between two and five dollars per 'drop'. Of those who estimated their daily panhandling earnings, 40% reported making between ten and thirty dollars per day, while 38% said they earned more than thirty dollars daily. Only 22% reported making more than fifty dollars per day. Days in which panhandlers earn larger amounts seem to

be rare, as those days stand out in their minds as uncommon occurrences. Examples of the times someone gave a twenty-dollar bill are memorable but uncommon.

Only a third of the respondents took a guess at how much they earn per hour when panhandling. Nine estimated earning between three and five dollars per hour, and an equal number estimated their earnings as five to ten dollars per hour. Six believed that they earned over ten dollars per hour on average. Only three respondents estimated their monthly income from panhandling: their answers were \$150, \$200, and \$800.

According to a few of the interviewees, their panhandling income as a panhandler is comparable to what they could make through employment. One interviewee said that he won't work for minimum wage because he makes more money panhandling, and another supported this: *"I can make more money than most people who work. Panhandling is my job."* Yet another agreed, but was not happy with this situation: *"Panhandling makes me bitter because its better money than getting paid work."*

Most interviewees said that they do not take more than they need. Almost two-thirds of those interviewed set a goal for each day, often for only \$10 or \$20, some as much as \$40, and a few said they only needed \$5 - just enough to cover their costs for the day. For those who set a goal, once they reached their goal, they stopped panhandling for the day.

"I take only what I need. I don't go overboard. It's an unwritten rule. Don't get greedy."

Some panhandlers explained this by their belief in sharing the space with others in need. Participants commented:

“When you leave a spot, it gives someone else a chance to make what they need. I’m not there to be greedy.”

“I don’t want to stay out panhandling after I have enough because there are others who are really stuck. I just take what I need, don’t want to take their spot.”

The vast majority of respondents (61 of 75) said they stop panhandling once they’ve made enough money or if they become too tired or sick to continue. Quite a few mentioned that if they were not making any money, it became discouraging so they would just give up entirely for the day. Inclement weather could also force some to stop. Only four respondents mentioned that the persistence of police or BIZ Ambassadors would make them stop panhandling.

Other Sources of Income

For many, what they make panhandling supplements their social assistance cheque, income from day labour, or other resources they draw upon (dumpster diving, picking cans, squeegeeing, soup kitchens, clothing banks, picking butts, etc.). The two most significant sources of income were social assistance and disability pensions. Other sources yielded very little income, the majority of which was irregular and infrequent. The few interviewees who were working - because most were part time, temporary or casual - received very modest amounts per month. No panhandlers reported wages over \$500 and most ranged from \$200 to \$300 per month.

Those whose only income is panhandling generally don’t have a home and all of the associated costs, so in that case, a panhandling income may be enough to meet the much lower costs of their basic needs when living on the streets or in shelters.

Does Panhandling Provide a Living?

For some, panhandling doesn’t even cover the cost of food. One man mentioned that he has missed a lot of meals just so that his kids could eat. An older respondent chuckled as he mentioned the health benefits of being on welfare:

“Going on welfare is a good way to lose weight. I can’t afford food, so my weight has gone down, and my blood pressure has gone down, too.”

Many mentioned they rely on what other people throw away. Some get most of their clothing from the garbage - even brand new clothing thrown away by retailers. Quite a few mentioned that they frequent the garbage cans and dumpsters behind restaurants and grocery stores for most of their food. One person even gave the details of the places he regularly visits and when: he knows exactly when they put the garbage out, so he is able to get fresh food, most of which is still wrapped, and he says he hasn’t been sick in three years of eating that way.

Panhandlers receive all kinds of donations besides money. Ninety percent of the interviewees indicated that people give them things besides money, whether solicited or not. Those respondents who had received non-monetary donations reported that most common were food/drinks (93%), cigarettes (51.5%), clothing (27.3%), alcohol (22%), and illegal drugs (20%). Other things less frequently mentioned include bus tickets, food coupons, books, jewellery, Blue Key, and even less frequently perfume, bedding, stuff to sell, a job, and ‘grief’.

Panhandlers were really appreciative about being given food, and their sincerity seemed evident in the details of the stories they told of times they had been given an entire meal, or taken out to a nice restaurant to order whatever they wanted off the menu.

What if Panhandling was Not an Option?

On those days when panhandlers can't get enough money, almost half of the respondents said that they do nothing and/or go hungry. Fifteen percent either borrow money or "bum off" family or friends, another fifteen percent said that they steal or sell drugs. Twelve percent pick cans or squeegee and eleven percent use the soup kitchens/services.

When asked the question "What if panhandling just wasn't an option?" 27% did not have any answer. They seemed to be at a complete loss. Another 17.5% said that they wouldn't be able to do anything and/or they would go hungry. This suggests that for almost half of the interviewees, panhandling is their final option or last resort.

Twenty percent of the respondents answered that if they could not panhandle, they would have to find a job. Most of them had previously mentioned that they are unable to work or have been unable to find work. Would this situation change if they had no other option available? Or would they still be unable to work or find work? If they couldn't panhandle, 14% of the interviewees said they would undertake other non-standard income earning activities, including the sex trade, busking, squeegeeing, and picking cans. Eight respondents (11%) said they would resort to stealing or break and enter.

Only two people (2.7%) replied that they would have to use the soup kitchens and shelters, and only one said he would go into a drug treatment program. This suggests that if panhandling were no longer an option, more panhandlers would turn to illegal activities than would turn to services.

Conclusion

The research suggests that extreme poverty is a major reason that drives people to panhandle. Related barriers that need to be dealt with in order to have any lasting change in their lives include addiction problems, disabilities, inability to find livable wage employment, low social assistance rates, high rental costs and homelessness. Even those interviewees who do work have to supplement their low wages by panhandling. Panhandlers' wages and welfare supports are not enough to cover their basic needs.

The fact that more panhandlers would rather turn to illegal activities than would turn to services if panhandling were no longer an option illustrates that social services available for panhandlers do not seem to be meeting their needs.

Tom Carter

Canada Research Chair
in Urban Change and Adaptation

Anita Friesen

Chesya Polevychok
Research Associates

John Osborne

Research Assistant

The Institute of Urban Studies
The University of Winnipeg
Phone: 1 (204) 982-1148
Fax: 1 (204) 943-4695
<http://ius.uwinnipeg.ca/>

Canada Research Chairs website at
www.chairs.gc.ca