



# RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

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## WHY DO PANHANDLERS PANHANDLE IN WINNIPEG?

### Introduction

Panhandlers in Winnipeg seem to have been growing in number in recent years, but little is known about their characteristics and life circumstances. Who are panhandlers and what makes them panhandle on the streets of Winnipeg? We need to know more about the realities of panhandlers' lives if we want to address the issues that result in people panhandling on the street.

This Research Highlight draws on the findings of interviews with 75 panhandlers conducted for the study *Panhandling In Winnipeg: Legislation vs. Support Services*<sup>1</sup>. It presents an account of key reasons for panhandling provided by interview participants. The larger study also examines methods and nature of panhandling, geographic distribution of the activity in the city; the way panhandlers spend their money, their housing circumstances and their use of supportive services.

### What Brought You to Panhandling?

For most interviewees' the immediate response to the question "What are the main reasons that brought you to panhandling?" was "I needed the money." When the question was rephrased as "What happened in your life that made it necessary to panhandle?" interviewees identified some causes and contributing factors related to their panhandling activity.

For most of the panhandlers interviewed, multiple factors were identified as having contributed to

their current situation. Often it was a series of unfortunate events, choices, behaviours or situations. Any one of these might not have been a problem to deal with had it occurred on its own, but when compounded by others, led to a point in their lives where they found themselves relying on panhandling. Key reasons provided by interview participants are presented below:

### Physical Disability

A physical disability, including chronic illness and/or injury was identified by 30 percent of those interviewed as the principal reason why they panhandle. Eleven percent of the respondents identified mental health issues, and five percent indicated their cognitive disability as having contributed to their current situation.

### Addictions

Drug and substance abuse was identified as a major factor by 11% of respondents, while alcohol abuse was mentioned by five percent as leading to reliance on panhandling. One interviewee stated that when he was much younger he was gainfully employed, but then turned to sniffing gas. As a result, he now has permanent brain damage, difficulties with his speech, and has trouble walking and needs crutches, so he can't work anymore.

Overall in this study almost half of the respondents reported alcohol, illegal drug, prescription, gambling, or substance use problems or addictions: among these, twelve reported multiple addictions (not including tobacco use). Some of the respondents said they had become addicted as

<sup>1</sup> For more details on this study please visit Canada Research Chair web site at [http://ius.uwinnipeg.ca/CRC/crc\\_publications\\_journals.htm](http://ius.uwinnipeg.ca/CRC/crc_publications_journals.htm)

children or young teens. Almost one third of all interviewees, reported an addiction to alcohol. Illegal drug addictions were self-reported by fifteen interviewees: marijuana or hash (9); crack (3); Cocaine (2); Methamphetamine (1). One interviewee reported having developed an addiction to methadone treatment. Four respondents reported addictions to prescription medication: three rely on Tylenol 3 or Codeine, one uses Valium. Six respondents reported problems with various other substances including inhalants: solvents, gas, glue; or drinking hairspray, mouthwash, or aftershave. Gambling was reported as an addiction by two respondents.

The cause and effect relationship between panhandling and addictions was not directly explored through the interviews, but some of the respondents offered insights on this from their own experiences. Some clearly identified addictions as a factor that contributed to their dependence on panhandling. For others, addictions have arisen as a result of the panhandling lifestyle. Some that became addicted to alcohol or drugs use it to lose inhibitions to gain the courage to beg. While some reported using drugs, alcohol or other substances to help them sleep outside in the cold, others said they relied on drugs for the opposite reason - to help keep them awake at night so they don't get "rolled" or attacked. For many the alcohol, drugs or other substances help them feel a sense of well-being, it takes away physical or emotional pain, and helps them escape the reality of their lives, if only for a short while.

### Being Unable to Find a Job

Being unable to find work for which they have the skills was reported as a major factor for 28% of the respondents. One sixty-year old interviewee had been employed doing graphic art layout for most of his working life. He quit his job and moved to Winnipeg in order to give palliative care to his parents for quite a few years. During that time, however, his type of work became computerized, and he no longer had the skills for the job. He was unable to do manual labour due to a back problem or any other job because of a low level of literacy. After his parents died, he lived on life insurance money until that ran out, and now only has income

from social assistance, which he finds he needs to supplement through panhandling.

Respondents provided other related reasons for panhandling. Three interviewees have never had a job. Eight respondents said they choose to panhandle because they enjoy it. Four indicated they choose to panhandle because they can earn more money at it than by working. Two interviewees declared that they were lazy, and chose not to work. Another said that he cannot get enough sleep because he is homeless, so he is too tired to work.

### Supplementing Income

Fifteen percent of the interviewees said they have found they have to panhandle to supplement either their employment earnings or their social assistance income. A further eight percent said they panhandle because they don't qualify for assistance. One interviewee was unemployed for three years and was on social assistance. He said he finally found a job, but then was laid off and couldn't get back on to social assistance, so he had to start panhandling.

### Other Reasons

There were a number of other factors mentioned by interviewees as having contributed to their need to panhandle.

Three of the interviewees identified a criminal record as a factor contributing to their reliance on panhandling, and two mentioned illiteracy or low education as a factor. Through the course of the rest of the interview, however, many more respondents indicated they had criminal records or low educational attainment.

Four respondents identified the ending of a relationship as a devastating experience that sparked a downward spiral, which included job loss, alcohol abuse, depression, and even homelessness. A couple of respondents indicated they had escaped abusive home situations and had

no money or resources. Another lost his family support so when he couldn't find work because of his mental health issues, criminal background and low skill level, he had no one to help him out.

Nineteen percent of the respondents, all youth, indicated that leaving home at a young age was the first factor in a series that led to having to panhandle. Many reported leaving home or voluntarily leaving care of Child and Family Services at the age of 12 or 13 and becoming homeless. Without a place to live they were unable to continue their schooling and so achieved a low level of educational attainment. Because they were too young to work, they began panhandling.

One young interviewee said he was feeling guilty for stealing, so he started to panhandle instead because *"it's an honest way to make money."*

## Conclusion

Reasons that brought people to panhandling are varied. The findings presented above illustrate that there are many different reasons contributing directly or indirectly to reliance on panhandling - abusive home and family situations, substance abuse, mental illness, low education and low skills level, unfortunate events, and poor life choices made in the past, just to name a few. Some people are driven to panhandle for one of these reasons, others because of multiple issues. The major underlying reason however is the situation of extreme poverty panhandlers are in.

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