



RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

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DIFFERENT GROUPS' PERCEPTION OF PANHANDLING IN WINNIPEG

Introduction

This research highlight draws on the literature review undertaken for *Panhandling In Winnipeg: Legislation vs. Support Services*¹. This study presents key socio-economic and demographic characteristics of panhandlers in Winnipeg, examines the effects of the current legislation on panhandling activities, and identifies inadequacies in support services and program initiatives that would effectively reduce some individuals' need to panhandle.

The literature provides valuable insights into who panhandles and why they are on the streets of North American cities. The review attempts to identify recent changes in panhandling activity, including the changing nature, number and characteristics of panhandlers, reactions by the public, business and government sectors, as well as changing attitudes toward the use of public space and the debate surrounding private versus public space in the urban environment.

This Research Highlight focuses on the diversity of opinions regarding people's perception of panhandling and the most appropriate way to address it. Irrespective of whether panhandlers pose a direct threat to the safety of a passersby, the general perception remains that panhandling does not contribute to the success of any area. Because of many social ills, one of which is begging, many view Winnipeg's downtown as unsafe or otherwise undesirable as a place to live.

Government officials and business owners worry that tourists, conventioners, and shoppers will stay away from parts of town where requests for donations are numerous. Many view aggressive behaviour as a direct threat to community life and the economic vitality of an area, as it generally makes people feel unsafe. If people feel threatened in a particular place they are likely to avoid the area in the future, resulting in a decline in business and community life, which can make the area ripe for more serious crime.

Urban residents' and businesses' perceptions and concerns about panhandling are presented below.

City Residents' Perceptions

A publication *Do You Give To Panhandlers? Winnipegger's Reaction to Panhandling* reports on a citywide survey that was conducted in February-March 2002 with 600 Winnipeg residents (The Probe Team 2002). When asked how they would most likely react to an appeal for money from a panhandler in downtown Winnipeg, only 20% of city adults interviewed indicated that they would offer a financial donation. Another 16%, however, indicated that they would consider giving money depending upon specific circumstances.

Key factors influencing the prospective donors include the appearance of the individual asking for money, an assessment of panhandler's sincerity and need, and whether or not the panhandler appears to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Some hesitant donors also conceded that their charity was dependent upon their own mood at the moment of the encounter and whether or

¹ For more details on this study please visit Canada Research Chair web site at http://ius.uwinnipeg.ca/CRC/crc_publications_journals.htm

not they had a suitable denomination of money on hand at the time. The incidence of giving to panhandlers did not depend on survey population subgroups or respondents' area of residence.

The Winnipeg Area Study surveyed one thousand Winnipeg residents in 1999, when the most restrictive panhandling by-law (By-law 6555/95) was in place (Linden 2000). Three quarters of respondents reported that they had been approached by a panhandler in Winnipeg; 68% said they had been approached in the last year; and most of these had been approached more than once. Of those who had been solicited, 21% reported being approached in a persistent fashion.

About 20% of those surveyed claimed they have avoided parts of the city because of panhandlers. Respondents identified downtown as the location most often avoided because of panhandling, followed by Osborne Village.

In terms of their support for restrictions on panhandling, the vast majority of Winnipeggers surveyed agreed with the prohibition of panhandling at bank machines (93%), bus shelters (85%), bus stops (83%), and businesses and stores (76%). Forty-two percent of respondents suggested additional locations where it should be prohibited. Those who had been approached in a manner that violated the By-law were more likely to favour restrictions. People over 65 years of age, women, and people with less than high school education were more likely to support restrictions. However, there were no differences by reported income. One might conclude that the most vulnerable segments of Winnipeg's population are most likely to feel threatened by panhandling and want it restricted.

A study by the Downtown BIZ that interviewed 1,000 Winnipeggers in 6 downtown locations in September 1999, found:

- Nearly all of those interviewed stated they had been approached by a panhandler in the past year;
- the contacts were made more frequently in the afternoon (91%) than in the morning (59%) or after sunset (49%);

- the most common places for being approached by a panhandler were sidewalks, bus stops, ATMs, near businesses or stores; and
- almost 70% supported the restriction of panhandling.

Business Owners' Perceptions

Many business owners say beggars have a harmful impact on the local economy and are a nuisance to people who live, work or visit downtown. They see panhandlers as a visible sign of a failing downtown and believe that the presence of panhandlers on the streets costs them customers (Collins and Blomley 2003, Schafer 1998). Not surprisingly businesses, especially in Winnipeg's inner city, are among the strongest supporters of anti-panhandling legislation.

In a survey of the Downtown Biz members in Winnipeg, respondents indicated that the presence of derelict buildings and panhandlers were the two most important issues negatively affecting downtown businesses (The Innovators Ltd. 2002). On a scale of 1 (no impact) to 7 (large impact) businesses rated derelict buildings at 6.2 and Panhandlers at 6.1. Other concerns included lack of visible policing, street kids and youth, media focusing on downtown crime, and prostitution. Some of the survey findings showed:

- 84% of the Downtown BIZ members surveyed thought that panhandling was a problem in downtown Winnipeg;
- those in retail sales were most likely to agree as 92% of them said that panhandling was a problem;
- almost all respondents (96%) were approached by a panhandler at least once in the previous year. To quote one member "Many, many times – like everyday!"
- nearly one in five members surveyed claimed that on occasion they gave money to panhandlers. Conversely most (81%) did not give money to panhandlers;

- nearly three quarters said they thought panhandling should be banned, while only 16% said that panhandling should be allowed; 22% agreed that panhandling should be allowed as long as it is in a non-aggressive manner; and
- most members (83%) said there should be better ways to get programs to panhandlers who need them. Also, two-thirds said that the public need to be educated about how to deal with panhandlers.

Very similar results are reported in a survey of the downtown business community in Vancouver (City of Vancouver 1998) and a survey commissioned by the Calgary Downtown Association (Cameron Strategy Inc. 2003). The Vancouver survey indicated that 73% of Business Improvement Association members felt that panhandling was a problem in the downtown area and it had worsened over the previous few years.

All Business Revitalization Zones in Calgary have also been experiencing an increase in panhandling. In the Downtown area, for example, 86% of respondents felt that panhandling had increased significantly over the previous year. The Calgary survey also revealed that about three quarters of respondents had encountered people on the street asking for money in the previous year, and of these, 40% gave money. Those giving money to people on the street tend to be male, younger to middle aged and university-educated. “Givers” were most likely to offer money once in an average month. Most gave between \$1 and \$3 (\$2.15 on average) each time.

Conclusion

To conclude, panhandling generates various perceptions: some see it as a sign of poverty and lack of services including affordable housing for marginalized groups. Others view it as having a negative effect on businesses. Some perceive panhandling to be the outcome of alcohol and substance abuse; the result of family breakdown; or as the actions of those unable or unwilling to sustain themselves by other activities. Those who see panhandling as a symptom of systemic

problems in society feel the “problem” has to be resolved by provision of services such as adequate, affordable housing, substance and alcohol rehabilitation programs, skills training and poverty alleviation initiatives. Those concerned about the real or perceived negative effects on business, although they would not argue against the need for such programs, want to get “the problem” off the streets and away from their establishments. Their assumption is that panhandlers on the street are negatively perceived and perhaps even frighten customers.

These concerns of the business community and the public have prompted many communities to pass by-laws to regulate and control panhandling. However, the systemic problems that generate the circumstances causing people to panhandle are complex – far too complex to solve by legislation alone.

Other research highlights in this series focus on the effectiveness of policing and legislation as a solution and review other approaches that may be more effective in addressing panhandling and the problems it is reputed to create.

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