



RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

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HOUSING CIRCUMSTANCES OF PANHANDLERS 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. We need to know more about panhandlers' realities 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*¹. It provides a description of these panhandlers' housing circumstances, use of shelters, and what affordable and safe shelter means in their lives. The larger study also examines the frequency of panhandling, methods of and reasons for panhandling, the amount of money collected and how it is spent, plus their use of supportive services.

Are Panhandlers Permanent Residents Of Winnipeg?

Seventy of the seventy-five interviewees considered themselves to be residents of Winnipeg. The five who did not are transient youth who referred to themselves as 'travellers'. They spend the warmer months of each year travelling across the country and settle down somewhere with a milder climate, such as Vancouver, for the winter months. Another fourteen of the interviewees lived elsewhere at other times of the year, either on reserves, or in urban centres in other provinces.

Housing Circumstances of Panhandlers

Contrary to popular belief, not all panhandlers are homeless. Thirty of those interviewed (40%) lived in rental accommodation. The proportion that rented is very similar to the proportion of renters in the city as a whole. In the inner city 64 percent of population are renters. The difference is that the non-renters in the population of the city or inner city are homeowners, but the non-renting panhandlers interviewed were homeless.

A little over half of the panhandlers who were renters had a room in a rooming house or residential hotel. The other half rented an apartment. Rental costs per unit ranged from \$110 to \$700 per month. Half of the rental units cost \$280 or less per month, reflecting the shelter component for a single person on social assistance. All but three included utilities in the cost of the rent. Only nine of the respondents reported sharing household expenses with another person. Two interviewees were staying in a residential rehabilitation centre at the time of the interview.

Homelessness among Panhandlers

In this study, sixty percent of the interviewees were homeless – they either slept outdoors, stayed in a shelter, "couch surfed", or some combination of the three. A third of all interviewees regularly "couch surfed", which is to stay for short periods of time with various friends or family, moving frequently from place to place and usually sleeping

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

on the couch or floor. Most who couch surfed said they pay a small amount of money to stay there, buy groceries, or contribute towards other household costs.

Twenty-one respondents said they regularly stayed in shelters, with Neeginan and the Main Street Project being the most frequently used. Three respondents said they stayed at the Salvation Army on a regular basis.

Seven interviewees indicated that the only place they slept was outdoors. In the winter months they used various techniques to keep from freezing to death. One panhandler said he lights a fire in a dumpster to warm it up, puts the fire out and climbs inside to sleep. Another sleeps outside over an air vent to stay warm in the winter, and when it gets muddy in the spring he sleeps in a window well. Another 15 interviewees reported sleeping outdoors regularly, but when the weather turns cold, they turn to the shelters or stay with friends or family who tend to be more sympathetic at that time of year.

Food and Shelter Expenses Are a Priority

When asked the question “What makes you panhandle or not panhandle on any given day?” the majority of respondents’ replies indicated they panhandle in order to get just enough money to meet their immediate basic needs. Most interviewees considered food, shelter, clothing, and bus tickets to be basic needs. This priority was reflected in what they reported spending their money on.

Ninety-three percent of the interviewees said they spend money they earn from panhandling on food: 88% ranked it as either first or second among their priorities for spending. Twenty-six percent spend their earnings on rent/shelter costs, which ranks among the top four spending priorities for 24% of the respondents. Those whose only income is panhandling generally don’t have a home and all of the associated costs, so in that case, a meagre panhandling income may be enough to meet the much lower costs of their basic needs when living on the streets or in shelters.

Use of Shelters

In Winnipeg there are three main emergency shelters for homeless adults (this does not include women’s emergency shelters). All are in the Main Street area south of Higgins Avenue within a few blocks of each other. Each offers a sleeping mat and floor space in a common area for the night, plus shared shower and washroom facilities. Main Street Project and Neeginan are free. Salvation Army charges \$11, and for an additional charge one can upgrade to a bed. There are two shelters in Winnipeg for youth under the age of 18 years old. MacDonald Youth Services on Mayfair, south east of downtown and Ndinawe in the North End both are free.

Interviewees’ reviews on the three adult emergency shelters were mixed. While some panhandlers were satisfied with services, others provided negative comments including unfriendly staff, the shelters being full, dangerous, crowded and unpleasant. Several people indicated they disliked sleeping right next to strangers. For anyone with anxieties related to crowds and groups of people, shelters are simply not an option. Half of the interviewees said they do not use shelters, either because they have other housing options or because they choose not to. When asked if there are any services they will not use, a third of the panhandlers interviewed stated that they refuse to use any shelters.

One youth commented:

“I need a secure place to live, a transition place from the street to finding a place to live. I’m a non-drug user, non-alcoholic and I don’t want to be in a shelter with smelly, weird acting people.”

Right now, other than sleeping on the streets, a shelter is his only option.

Role of Housing in Stopping Panhandling

Many interviewees felt that a job was all they needed in order to be able to stop panhandling. However, homelessness and poor housing circumstances is a major barrier to employment for panhandlers. One interviewee noted a common Catch-22 situation:

“You need a house to get a job and you need a job to get a house.”

It is hard for anyone to get a job without a permanent address, or a phone number where they can be reached.

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 the 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 with their schooling and so achieved a low level of educational attainment. Because they were too young to work, they began panhandling.

Conclusion

Winnipeg’s panhandling population has poor housing circumstances. Some interviewees were fortunate enough to have a place to live, although they may have to panhandle to cover the rent. More than half of the panhandlers in this study, however, were homeless - sleeping outdoors, staying in shelters, and/or “couch-surfing”. Without housing it is very difficult for panhandlers to turn their lives around - find a job, improve their skills or get education. Housing is one of the multiple compounding issues and barriers that need to be dealt with in order to have any substantive, positive and lasting change in their lives.

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