



**PANHANDLING:
A STREET STUDY
October 18, 2010**

BACKGROUND:

Boyle Street Community Services was contracted by the REACH Edmonton Council for Safe Communities to prepare a report on panhandlers and their needs. Funding for the project was provided by REACH and administered through the City of Edmonton. BSCS outreach staff, who are knowledgeable about panhandling issues throughout the city, were tasked with the project.

OBJECTIVES:

The survey's purpose was to provide intelligence about panhandlers, including:

- Demographic information.
- The reasons why they were on the street/or why they were panhandling.
- Their principal needs, including basic necessities, housing, employment, addictions, etc.
- Interventions which would be most helpful; understanding which services individuals might already use and what might be beneficial to them to increase stability and reduce or prevent panhandling.
- Conditions/situations of panhandlers, such as disabilities, etc.

METHODOLOGY

Ken Armstrong, the lead investigator on the project, is an outreach worker with Boyle Street Community Services. He has considerable experience in connecting with people who are homeless, and linking them with appropriate supports. We surveyed 45 people - 36 individuals are actively panhandling now; the other 9 had been engaged in panhandling in their past and are currently surviving on the street. All are homeless. We asked the current panhandlers more open ended questions to better understand their current circumstances. A version of Survey Monkey was used to facilitate the analysis of the answers. In addition, members of a smaller focus group of panhandlers were asked questions about past experiences and what in their lives would have had to change to end their panhandling activities. The locations selected

for the study were downtown Edmonton, Oliver and Stony Plain Road. Callingwood was also selected for interview purposes, but potential subjects were difficult to find.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Of those interviewed, 85 per cent were men and 15 per cent women. Ages ranged between 25 to 64. More than half had never been married. Only five had completed grade 12. None of the respondents had any form of full-time or part-time employment.

KEY FINDINGS/THEMES

Reasons for not working

Homelessness was by far the main reason given for not having employment. Of the 26 respondents who answered the question, 24 cited homelessness.

Homelessness

In total, 44 of the 45 interviewed said they had no home. Only one respondent said he shared dormitory accommodation in a city shelter.

Panhandling experience

The length of time spent on the street varied considerably. One respondent said he'd been panhandling for 15 years; others for a few months. The average was around four years. Most respondents panhandle on a daily basis. Busiest time of day: between 4.30 pm and 10 pm. Best days: Friday and Saturday – especially close to Christmas.

When to stop

Respondents were asked what would stop them panhandling for the day. The majority replied they stopped only when they had made enough money.

Why did they start?

Respondents gave a variety of reasons for starting to panhandle. For many it was shortage of money after becoming homeless; for others it was a fast way to make money without stealing. It was also a quicker way to make money than bottle picking.

How much do they make?

This amount varied enormously. One respondent estimated he averaged \$180 a day; others were more modest, with estimates ranging from \$50 a day to \$120.

How do they spend their cash?

First priorities for spending their money were food and tobacco, rather than to serve an addiction. These priorities were followed by alcohol, illicit drugs, public transit and clothing.

Generosity

The majority of respondents will share their money with those that don't have any. Of the 28 people who replied to a question about sharing, 24 said they gave money to friends.

What do they enjoy?

The most common response to the question, "what do you enjoy about panhandling?", related to meeting people, or kind people.

What if they couldn't panhandle?

Most respondents didn't know what they would do if they were unable to panhandle; others felt they would be forced to steal or starve.

Any support systems?

Only six out of 27 people who responded said they used any form of social supports or services. These included food banks, shelters and drop in centres.

Any disabilities?

All 45 respondents answered this question. A total of 33 said they had some form of disability. Five said they had mental health problems; 19 had physical difficulties, including arthritis, back and leg problems and missing fingers.

What do they need to stop panhandling?

The answers to this question were diverse, but the bulk of the respondents wanted a home of their own – and freedom from addictions.

Do they have a substance abuse issue?

Every one of the 31 respondents who answered this question confirmed an addiction/abuse issues. A total of 51 per cent had used services to try to overcome addictions.

Ethnic/cultural background

Of the 45 respondents, 17 said they had aboriginal ancestry. The rest included a variety of cultures.

The Panhandler's Perspective – Findings From a Focus Group

Understanding panhandling from the panhandler's perspective, is to understand it from lived experience: from the life that is lived on the streets. We learned a lot from two panhandlers in a small focus group who are motivated to reduce their panhandling behavior.

I never want to return to the streets. I have a home now, have a kitty. I want a computer so bad. I'll learn, go to school. I'll do whatever. Since I've been housed I have cut my crack intake down more than half. I haven't called my drug dealer in a month. I'm not so bored. I haven't panhandled in the last month and a half. For income, I no longer need \$30 times ten a day – so I now pick bottles. In the last month, I've panhandled only twice.

I've gained 20 pounds since I've been inside. I feel good. As soon as I can get mentally together, I will get a labor job. I will not give up.... I'm so nourished my cat is sucking on me.

The following themes along with verbatim comments (corresponding evidence), reflect their perspective:

Panhandling Pulls You Down

- *Panning is hard on my self-esteem. You get a lot of put down. People tell you "Get a job you piece of shit".*
- *There is a lot of disrespectful people on the street.*

The Need for Drugs Control the Mind

- *I've seen panhandlers throw food away, as they are not hungry. You have no appetite when on drugs.*
- *I've seen a guy buy a panhandler groceries. The panhandler will keep the receipt and then return the food for money to buy crack.*
- *A guy will be social to your face, while thinking about how much time is wasting and he is not on the streets getting money. Deep in his mind he is pissed off, thinking there goes \$5.00. His mind is always on the job and thinking about what he is losing while talking to you.*
- *On crack you cannot stop thinking of anything else but getting more crack. Do not think about sex, food, just about filling your pipe. When I'm on marijuana, I do not want crack. I enjoy the moment.*

Reprogramming One's Thinking is Necessary for Change

- *I need to reprogram myself. Now buy weed or get groceries. I try to budget. And I lived better than most when I was on the street. I've always had what I needed. I lived in an underground home, contracted by my friend (another fellow who lives on the streets, known to be brilliant with schizophrenia, has exceptional survival skills and has "ten people living in his head, addicted to methadone.). We had lights that were run off a car battery.*

The environment impacts panhandling behaviour

- *It's the environment that affects how you act. It's a different scenario for survival in different areas. In the Oliver area we act like a family. It's very different on Jasper – where guys rip each other off. And it's different on Whyte.*

Understanding the complexity of panhandling

Themes that speak to understanding the complexity of panhandling as well as what keeps panhandlers on the streets are presented below. These themes have been identified based on a two-hour conversation with two panhandlers.

Panhandlers have tight friendships that form circles within circles.

- They do not respect certain forms of panhandling – those that are perceived as “disrespectful” – those who approach moms with children, those who “bump” others off the sidewalks in front of Boyle Street Community Services.
- Gave a warm reception (and their food) to a fellow who they knew and who is very difficult to connect with.
- They feel close to those in “their” community – the Oliver area. Other panhandlers are not welcomed, those who are not part of this community and who do not share similar unspoken values – no aggression, no scamming, help each other.
- Some are “shady” and this wrecks friendships.

Recognize each other’s talents

- He built the underground home. A huge hole in the ground, concrete floor, boarded on the sides, window, heat and lights. “He is brilliant”. A metal and can collector who can get anyone what they want within a day. “A guy wanted a gold chain and he got it for him the same day”. He is on AISH. Rents a storage unit to keep all his stuff.

Factors that sustain addictive behaviors

- Boredom – *Nothing to do but to smoke crack. There are no physical withdrawals from crack but mental ones. All you think about is getting the next point (dose). The whole day is consumed by getting the stuff. Takes \$30 time ten a day. Each point lasts five minutes.*
- Adventure – *Chasing it is an adventure. Get a rush and whole process is a chase. Like hunting. A primal urge. Get the money, find a phone, find the number, make the call, meet the guy, all of which is exciting in itself. Get high from the chase.*

Not all panhandlers are the same

There are different types of panhandlers, and some are seen as less respectable. And as one panhandler said:

“The aggressive ones, makes us all look bad. I have no respect for those who approach women with children in parking lots or shout obscenities to others.”

“Those that rip people off, give us a bad name. Our group stick up for each other or those who can’t.

“I don’t go downtown, as the street people will push you off the sidewalk if they don’t like you. There is so much disrespect downtown.”

Support/help from the panhandler's perspective

Support from the panhandler's experience is about:

Outreach that is there when you are ready to accept help.

- *Ken bugged me for three years.*

Not money but a place to stay, socks, shoes and coats in winter.

- *This housing program helped. If I had rent cheques come to me directly, I would have problems. You cannot manage money, so long as you're mentally controlled by addiction.*
- *Even housed, I do not have enough socks. Socks, shoes and coats in winter would help. Wouldn't throw these away.*

Something to do

- *I keep myself clean, I have incentive, I wash dishes as I used them. I don't throw them away like I use to. I care. I keep my place clean.*

Recognition that change is stressful and takes time.

- *We know how to live on the street.*
- *It take time to be employable. Takes over a year for the mind to get normal. I need to reprogram myself.*

Understanding the change journey from "not caring" to "caring" about yourself.

- *See this finger – (deformed) It was infected so bad doctors had to cut from here to here. Needed stitches, but I was so fixated on getting drugs, I didn't get stitched and ended up in Emergency. Ken can show you pictures. I didn't care about my figure, all I cared about was getting crack. It controls you.*

Help goes where you are at

- *Help has to go to them*

Help is genuine and real

- *It has to **feel** I can get help. Some are into discipline instead of help which is genuine.*

Panhandlers know there is support available

Even when one panhandler wants to support his friend, he knows that his friend must be at a place (rock bottom) of receiving it. This was evident, when one panhandler who had a home, invited his street friend to come and visit – where he could get a hot shower, food and a bed to sleep in – and in the second breath told us that his friend would not take up his invitation. (Although his friend was not a panhandler, he lived on the streets all year round. Reasons for being a collector rather than a panhandler is "*I cannot stand the insults and I cannot lie.*")

- *This city will feed, clothe and house you. You can get in anytime you want. But you have to want it. Most just want the drugs.*

Being ready to receive help was echoed by the outreach worker who said:
When they are at the place of being run down, sick and tired you have to get them there, which is a place of mentally being ready for change. You have to go right NOW and not wait, as tomorrow is a different mindset which can then take years to access help.

Understanding change from the panhandlers' perspective

Change is scary and stressful

- *Change is scary. I had 7 years with no bills. No stress to pay bills. I didn't worry about bills. By panhandling I can get what I need for that day.*
- *The broker you are, the less stress you have. I have nothing to give up. To have to pay bills is to stress.*

Change is uncomfortable

- *Change is not comfortable. Why struggle to live inside when there is no struggle on the streets.*

There is confidence in the familiar

- *I know I can get what I need by panhandling. I have the ability to do it. I can survive. I can do it.*
- *Anything I want I can get.*

Focus group was positive for the participants.

Those who participated in the focus group and shared their experiences were positively impacted. Before leaving, they agreed to being involved in the future. The fact that they experienced the conversation as engaging was confirmed by the outreach worker as is evident by his comments: *Thanks for today-it was great. The guys really felt good about helping out. I'm sure they would be up for something similar in the future if need be .* This indicates that positive engagement resulted in feeling empowered and having purpose. This is particularly relevant given that "keeping busy" was considered by panhandlers as supportive and important for change.

Learning About Engagement

We learn that getting the two panhandlers to talk with us required preparatory work on the part of the outreach worker. Not only did he have a positive relationship with the two panhandlers, who are grateful to him for his support, but as one of the panhandlers said: *When Ken called I wasn't going to come today as I had the opportunity to make \$40. Ken said he would match it, and that there would be food, if I came. So here I am.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Year-round street outreach to panhandlers is key to ensuring that they receive ongoing supports and are aware of services which are available.
2. A coordinated approach to working with panhandlers, including inner city agencies and Edmonton Police Service would ensure greater support and understanding for the panhandling community.
3. Providing access to housing using a “rapid exit program” system is key. This facilitates rapid housing by relying on early identification and resolution of an individual's "housing barriers" and providing the assistance necessary to facilitate the success of permanent housing.