



# RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

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## WHO PANHANDLES IN WINNIPEG?

### Introduction

Panhandlers in Winnipeg seem to have been growing in number in recent years, but little has been known about who they are. How old are they? Are there more men than women panhandling? Do they have families? We need to know more about their socio-economic and demographic characteristics 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 plus observation and mapping of the activity. It provides a description of these panhandlers' socio-economic and demographic characteristics. Based on information drawn from the study *Panhandling In Winnipeg: Legislation vs. Support Services*<sup>1</sup>. 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 panhandlers' use of supportive services.

### Age, Gender and Marital Status

It is not possible to determine accurately the total number of panhandlers in Winnipeg due to the sporadic nature of the activity and transience of this population. The research suggests there were probably between 50 and 150 regular panhandlers in the city. The information collected indicates that the panhandling population has a very different demographic profile than Winnipeg's general population or the population of the inner city.

Of the 75 panhandlers interviewed, 16 were female (21.3%) and 59 were male (78.7%). This

predominance of men is also confirmed by the data gathered through observation: 17% female and 83% male. The age of interviewees ranged from 17 to 60, with twice as many in the age bracket of 25 – 44 years as the general population. Although no seniors or children were found panhandling in this study, the ratio of youth aged 14-24 was considerably higher than in the general population. Ethnicity based on self-identification by the interviewees was: 38% Caucasian, 38% First Nations, and 17% Metis, with a small proportion of Inuit (4%) and other visible minority (3%).

Among those interviewed, there was a very high proportion that had never been married, and a correspondingly small percentage who were married. Several respondents had children, but few had children living with them as dependents: for those panhandlers who did, they were often their children's sole support.

### Level of Education

In total, about sixty seven percent of the panhandlers interviewed had not completed high school. Sixteen percent of them had not even completed elementary school. Sixteen percent had achieved less than grade nine, compared to only 7.8% of the city population and 12.4% of the inner city population.

Approximately one-third had achieved at least a high school diploma. The percentages of those interviewed whose highest educational level was high school are quite similar between the interviewees, the inner city, and the city overall. However, only one interviewee achieved a

university degree compared to 18.3% of the city and 15.0% of the inner city populations.

The fact that panhandlers have much lower educational levels than the rest of the city makes their access to the labour market difficult.

## Physical and Mental Disabilities

Seventy-two percent of the interviewees reported having a disability of some kind. Seventy percent of those who said they have a disability identified a physical impairment and 35% said they have a mental health problem. There was overlap in these numbers because twenty interviewees identified multiple disabilities. Disabilities reported included different physical and cognitive problems, illiteracy, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The high ratio of these disabilities in panhandlers explains why it is so hard for them to get or keep a job.

Thirty-seven of the interviewees who self-reported a disability, although it may prevent them from working, had not been assessed or had not applied for disability benefits. In some cases, interviewees reported having been assessed by doctors as having disabilities, but were still not receiving disability benefits.

## Employment and Other Sources of Income

Eighty-five percent of the panhandlers interviewed were unemployed or not working regularly. Of the 15 percent who were employed, almost all were working part time or sporadically in temporary, seasonal, casual or day labour jobs. Of those working, just over 60 percent were employed in construction or general labour positions (usually day labour jobs). A few panhandlers actually worked in areas that are generally considered to be more stable employment, including auto body repair, market

research analysis, landscaping, and arts and crafts.

Although very few of those interviewed were employed, just over 70 percent indicated they received income from sources other than panhandling. Only 25% relied solely on panhandling as their only source of income. Other income came from a variety of sources (some reported more than one source):

- wages and salaries (for about 5% of those interviewed);
- social assistance (36%);
- GST rebate (29%);
- disability pension (23%);
- money from friends and family (5%);
- employment insurance (2%);
- seniors benefits (2%),
- child benefits (2%);

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. Most of those on social assistance received the basic shelter and personal allowance given to individuals: \$286 for rent and the basic personal allowance of \$485. A few who have dependent partners or children received more. Some received less because they earned income from other sources during the month which was then deducted from their personal social assistance allowance. Those on disability pensions generally received between \$200 and \$500 per month. The few who were working - because most were part time, temporary or casual - received very modest amounts per month. No panhandler's wage was over \$500 and most ranged from \$200 to \$300.

## Housing Characteristics

Contrary to popular belief, not all panhandlers were homeless. Thirty of those interviewed (40%) lived in rental accommodation. Interestingly, this is similar to the proportion of renters in the city as a whole, but is much lower than the 64 percent in the inner city who rent. The major difference in housing characteristics was that none of the

panhandlers interviewed were homeowners. They were either renters or 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 range 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.

In this study 45 of the 75 interviewees (62.7%) 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 friends or family, usually sleeping on the couch or floor. Twenty one respondents said they regularly stay in homeless shelters. Seven interviewees indicated that the only place they sleep is outdoors. Another 15 interviewees reported sleeping outdoors regularly, but when the weather turns cold, they stayed at shelters or with friends or family.

## Conclusion

The “average” panhandler in Winnipeg is a 37-year-old single non-Caucasian male. He has not completed high school, is unemployed, receives income assistance, is homeless, and is likely to have mental or physical disability. The range of characteristics, however, is quite diverse in terms of age, gender, income, education, ethnicity, marital status and housing situation. Even if they have a place to live, an education and a job, their employment income or income assistance is insufficient and so they turn to panhandling. Panhandlers’ life circumstances are far from ideal and very different than that of the average Winnipegger.

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## Socio-Economic Characteristics: Panhandlers Versus The Winnipeg Population

	Winnipeg 2001	Inner-City 2001	Study Sample
<b>Age Groups</b>			
15 - 24 yrs	13.84%	14.51%	22.70%
25 - 44 yrs	30.39%	33.48%	61.30%
45 - 64 yrs	23.34%	20.16%	16%
<b>Median Age</b>	38.3	37.7	37
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	48.5%	49.2%	78.7%
Female	51.5%	50.8%	21.3%
<b>Marital Status</b>			
Never Married	33.7%	46.7%	65.3%
Married	48.8%	31.5%	5.3%
Common Law	6.9%	9.5%	16.0%
Separated or Divorced	10.9%	14.1%	10.6%
Widowed	6.6%	7.7%	2.6%
<b>Ethnicity</b>			
First Nations	8.6%	19.2%	38.0%
Métis	4.7%	6.8%	17.0%
Inuit	0.0%	0.1%	4.2%
Visible Minority	13.4%	20.0%	2.8%
<b>Education (highest level achieved)</b>			
Less Than Grade 9	7.8%	12.4%	16.0%
High School Diploma	32.1%	34.9%	33.0%
University Degree	18.3%	15.0%	1.3%
<b>Unemployed</b>	3.9%	5.7%	85.3%
<b>Housing Situation</b>			
Homeless	N/A	N/A	62.7%
Renters	36.4%	63.7%	37.3%
Owners	63.6%	36.3%	0.0%

Source: Interviews and Statistics Canada.