



## **PANHANDLING IN DOWNTOWN INDIANAPOLIS 2017**

### A Survey of Panhandlers in the Downtown Indianapolis Square Mile

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention (CHIP), in coordination with Downtown Indy, Inc., commissioned a survey of panhandlers in the Downtown Indianapolis Square Mile in the Spring of 2017. CHIP worked with researchers at the Indiana University Public Policy Institute (PPI) to design a research plan aimed to better understand the demographics, issues, and habits of those who panhandle in Downtown Indianapolis. While many cities are concerned with the human and economic impacts of panhandling, scarce research has gathered information directly from panhandling populations. This study contributes to a small body of national research attempting to better understand those who panhandle, and provides a baseline for discussing how to better serve this population while maintaining a vital city center.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

Given the transitory and undocumented nature of this lifestyle, it can be difficult to reach the entire Indianapolis panhandling population. Therefore, the outreach team surveyed the Downtown Indianapolis Square Mile on three separate days during lunch and after-work hours. Dates were chosen based on seasonal factors and expected pedestrian foot traffic. Any individuals seen panhandling were approached to take the survey. No identifying information was collected for research purposes. *The aggregate results of all surveys reflect self-reported responses of panhandlers who agreed to complete the survey.*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four panhandlers to supplement survey responses.

#### **KEY FINDINGS**

- 96% of surveyed panhandlers report being homeless
- Surveyed panhandlers treat panhandling like a regular job and mostly rely on panhandling to purchase food
- About 1/4 panhandlers use money earned from panhandling to pay for a place to stay
- Downtown panhandlers on average make less than \$20 per day, although half panhandle for 8+ hours a day
- Over 1/2 of surveyed panhandlers have no other sources of income
- A number of issues, such as health/disability, lack of identification, or criminal history, prevent panhandlers from engaging in other forms of work
- Majority of panhandlers panhandle year round, and have been doing so for multiple years
- Most Downtown panhandlers surveyed sleep in or close to Downtown Indianapolis

#### **RESULTS**

In total, 73 individual panhandlers were approached to participate in the study. 49 consented to answer all survey questions for a complete response rate of 67%. A few panhandlers were unwilling to answer certain questions. Therefore, sample size for questions with more than 49 responses is denoted by “n = (sample size)”.

**DEMOGRAPHICS.** Downtown panhandlers ranged from 20 to 68 years old. The average age for surveyed population was 43 years old (n=51). On average, female panhandlers (34 years old) were younger than their male counterparts (46 years old). 79% of panhandlers surveyed were male (n=53). In terms of race, 53% of panhandlers were Caucasian, 43% were African American, 4% were of multiple races, and 8% reported having Hispanic or Latino ethnicity (n=53). 14% of panhandlers surveyed reported they had served in the military (n=49).

**HOMELESSNESS.** 96% of panhandlers considered themselves homeless at the time they were surveyed (n=49). Interviewers also asked questions related to locations panhandlers had slept in throughout the year to better understand their experiences with homelessness. Most panhandlers were from the area: about two-thirds slept Downtown, and another third slept somewhere else in Indianapolis. 81% of panhandlers said they slept most often in a “car, tent, bus station, abandoned building or other public place,” followed by 13% who said they slept most often with friends or relatives. The remaining 6% had slept most often in a shelter or transitional housing. One interviewee reported they had been homeless for the past 13 years. A 74 year-old interviewee was missing a limb, bound to a wheelchair, and had been sleeping under a bridge.

Panhandlers were also asked to indicate places they had slept in for the past 12 months. 73% of surveyed panhandlers had slept in a public or abandoned place, 47% had slept in a temporary shelter, and 41% had stayed with friends or relatives. Only 16% reported having slept in their own house or apartment, and 6% reported they had spent some nights in jail.

**PANHANDLING.** For most, panhandling is not a temporary source of income and is treated as a full-time job. 45% of survey respondents reported they panhandle almost every day (Figure 1). Everyday panhandlers were more likely to panhandle 8 or more hours per day, while those who panhandle less than once a week typically did so for 3 or fewer hours. About 1/2 of surveyed panhandlers said they panhandle 8 or more hours per day (Figure 2), and about 60% panhandle year-round (Figure 3).

When questioned about their panhandling career, 31% of panhandlers indicated they had been panhandling for 8 or more years. Another 31% had begun panhandling 2-3 years ago, and 22% had begun that year or recently. Many panhandlers reported difficulty acquiring a job and more than 20% attributed this to a disability or other health issue. 12% of panhandlers specifically mentioned a lack of identification as a barrier to acquiring a job, and some alluded to a criminal history. One of the panhandlers that was interviewed described his difficulty with finding a job due to a developmental disability. “There are things I have to read 3-4 times before I can understand it. Some of these jobs won't put up with that.”

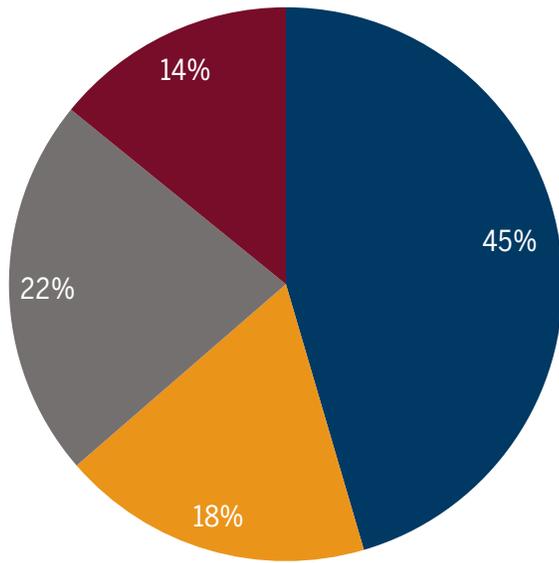
Overall, panhandlers made limited money from panhandling and otherwise received little additional income or benefits. 53% of panhandlers reported no other sources of income aside from panhandling. Most made \$20 or less per day regardless of time spent panhandling (Figure 4). The 17% that reported earning \$40 or more per day typically spent 8 or more hours panhandling. The majority of panhandlers indicated they used the money earned from panhandling to buy food (86%), or take care of other personal needs (53%). 22% indicated they had used the money to pay for a place to stay, and 20% admitted to buying alcohol or drugs.

Panhandlers were generally not connected with or otherwise experienced barriers restricting access to income support programs. Only 6% of panhandlers said they received food stamps, and 12% received a other public benefits. One interviewee stated “Even though I get Social Security income, I still have to panhandle so that I can afford to get food in the house.” Another interviewee said “I panhandle until [my husband] gets his [disability] check” to ensure they have income for food in the meantime. 67% of surveyed panhandlers reported they had received services in the community, whether from an outreach team, food bank, shelter, or other homeless service.

**RELATIONSHIPS.** Some interviewed panhandlers identified relationships as a factor that could affect their panhandling habits and participation in outreach programs. One interviewee said he wouldn't

**FIGURE 1.**

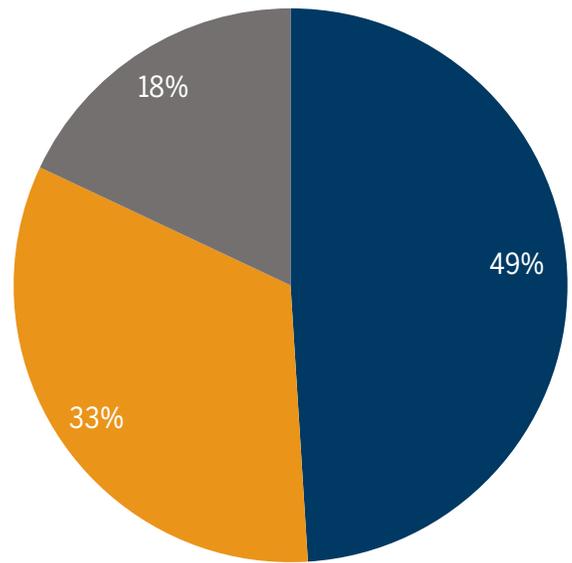
*How often do you panhandle?*



- Every day
- 5-6 days per week
- 3-4 days per week
- 2 or fewer days per week

**FIGURE 2.**

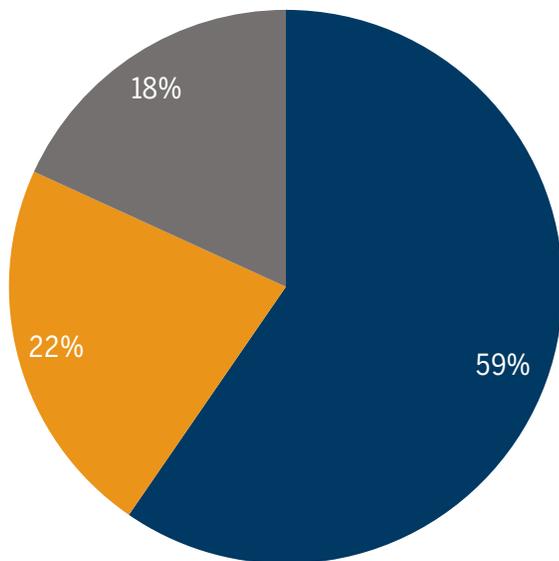
*How many hours a day do you typically panhandle?*



- 8 or more
- 4-8 hours per day
- Fewer than 4 hours per day

**FIGURE 3.**

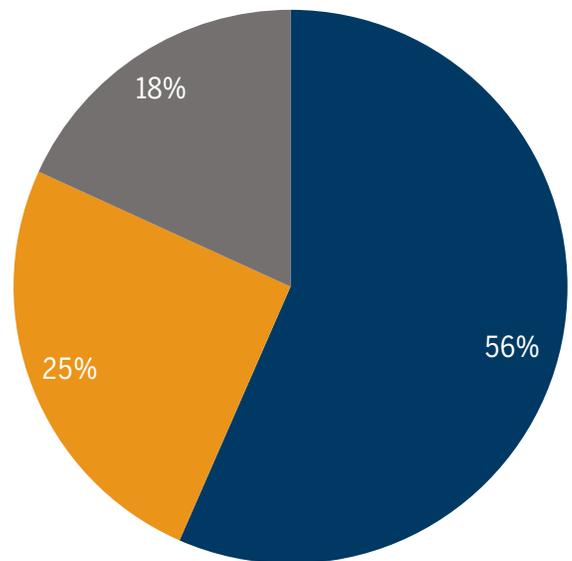
*How many of the past 12 months have you panhandled?*



- 7-12 months
- 3-6 months
- 3 or fewer months

**FIGURE 4.**

*How much do you typically make in one day of panhandling?*



- \$20 or less
- \$20-\$40
- More than \$40

leave a friend who was also homeless and regularly panhandled. When asked if he would join a housing program that same day, he said, "I would wait on [my friend]...I don't want him to be by himself." Another interviewee cared for her younger sister and an elderly man with behavioral health issues who lived with her in a homeless camp. One interviewee reported that she and her husband expected to have a home and be off the streets "very soon" thanks to housing services.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present study serves to inform stakeholders of the lives of at least 49 panhandlers. From this information we can begin to make inferences about the general panhandling population in Downtown Indianapolis.

Broadly, the Downtown Indianapolis panhandling population is homeless and faces many of the same obstacles as the general homeless population. It is unclear, however, what differentiates a person experiencing homelessness who panhandles from someone who does not.

Prevalence of health issues, substance use, criminal histories, and paperwork complications can make

thriving difficult for the Indianapolis panhandling population. Although multiple Indianapolis outreach organizations provide help obtaining different forms of identification, some panhandlers mentioned lack of identification as a barrier to applying for jobs and accessing public benefits. Even those who receive benefits expressed difficulty making ends meet without panhandling.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should determine and analyze;

- Factors that differentiate homeless panhandlers from homeless persons who do not panhandle;
- The extent to which panhandlers are contacted and served by homeless serving organizations;
- Whether sub-populations of downtown panhandlers are less likely to engage with outreach or receive services;
- And the barriers that prevent the panhandling population from securing and maintaining housing, employment and income support.

Finally, since the commencement of this study, 8 panhandlers have been housed. A longitudinal study of these and other housed panhandlers can begin to shed light on the impact of housing and additional supportive services.



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