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TUE APR 8, 2014

LOCAL NEWS

# 10 troubling truths about Toronto panhandlers

BY: KIM HUGHES

Panhandling is Toronto's dirtiest open secret. We rarely talk about it, yet every single person who walks our streets or rides our transit will inevitably encounter someone begging for spare change. The only variable is whether the request will come gently or aggressively. No neighbourhood is exempt, no storefront is immune, and no citizen can move about unaware of its presence. That goes double for the summer tourists soon to descend, and who will find themselves furiously shaken down from Queens Quay to Eaton Centre. (This particular local specialty isn't in the guide books, though maybe it should be.)

The question is: why? Why is panhandling so pervasive here? Why do so many panhandlers scan as white and able-bodied, and does it matter anyway? Is panhandling a sad but irrefutable symptom of deficient social services or merely an urban blight perpetrated by ne'er-do-wells? Are we keeping panhandlers on the streets by giving them money? And what is the City prepared to do about it? We sought answers from those on the front lines. The short answer to panhandling is: There is no short answer.

## 1. It really is as widespread as you suspect.

Experts agree panhandling is linked to homelessness, and homelessness in Toronto is significant (endless new condos notwithstanding). According to a 2013 Street Needs Assessment (SNA) survey conducted by the City of Toronto in cahoots with 500 trained volunteers and team leaders from the community, an estimated 5,253 people were homeless in Toronto on the night of April 17, 2013 (representative of any given night in the city). Some 447 individuals, or 9 per cent of Toronto's homeless population, are estimated to have been sleeping outdoors that night. (The rest were in the shelter system, hospitals, treatment centres, and correctional facilities.)

On the plus side, the 2013 SNA asserts that "panhandling among the homeless has decreased" to 6 per cent in 2013 from 10 per cent in 2009 and 17 per cent in 2006 (when two previous SNAs were conducted). However, this data was self-reported by individuals offered a \$7.50 gift card for their cooperation in completing the survey. And panhandling among the housed (even the vulnerably housed) wasn't tallied.

“We don’t do a census of panhandlers, so we cannot comment on whether there are more panhandlers on the streets,” says Patricia Anderson, a spokesperson for Shelter, Support & Housing Administration (SSHA), the City division responsible for housing and homelessness services.

“We do know that many panhandlers are in fact in housing and rely on panhandling to make ends meet. When you compare social-assistance rates and minimum-wage rates to the cost of housing in Toronto—plus long waiting lists for subsidized housing and low vacancy rates—it may not be surprising. For example, Ontario Works for a single person [in January 2014] was \$526 a month. The average market rent for a bachelor apartment was \$907.”

So the exact number of panhandlers out there is anyone’s guess. Still, the fact that the SNA was able to complete nearly 2,000, 13-question surveys in a six-hour period over a single night among those claiming homelessness augurs pretty poorly for us all.

## **2. Panhandling is not a red-hot political issue at City Hall.**

“We did deal with it maybe five or six years ago as a city under the previous administration, but it’s not even close to being on the radar right now,” confirms Toronto City Councillor Joe Mihevc (Ward 21, St. Paul’s West), who is cited by front-line workers as especially conversant on the subject.

“The Streets to Homes program [introduced in 2005 under then-mayor David Miller] was, among other things, created to reach out to panhandlers and to deal with more fundamental issues they were dealing with—poverty, homelessness, mental health or addiction issues. And it adopts a social-service approach rather than a policing approach.

“In that regard, I think we are pioneers,” Mihevc continues. “Streets to Homes was noted in a United Nations report [in 2008] as a top-notch strategy for dealing with homelessness. But that’s at a symptomatic level. At a deeper level, we have a lot of work to do in the area of poverty reduction, homelessness, social assistance and for people to get adequate income from employment, even when that employment is full-time.”

## **3. It’s not much of a policing issue either, evidently.**

“We don’t have a policy that is specific to panhandlers,” snaps Mark Pugash, director of corporate communications for Toronto Police Service, when asked if there is any protocol in place for dealing with panhandlers. “There is no reason to distinguish panhandlers from other people. The law is there, the law is applied. I can’t tell you how often police are called in to respond to panhandlers because calls are not classified in that way. We respond to calls for service. That’s our job.”

## **4. Why do panhandlers always seem to be Caucasian men, First Nations, or teens?**

Probably because they are. “Consistent with previous years, respondents identifying as male represent almost two-thirds of the homeless population in Toronto (65%),” according to the 2013 Street Needs Assessment. Moreover, the report says that “as in 2006 and 2009, individuals self-identifying as Aboriginal are vastly overrepresented among Toronto’s homeless when compared to their share of the general population.” Statistics Canada data pegs 1.2 per cent of GTA residents with Aboriginal ancestry, yet a third of the outdoor homeless population identifies as Aboriginal, according to the SNA.

Meanwhile, street youth, in the eyes of Jim Nason—a social worker and director of operations with Loft Community Services—are often runaways from smaller communities. “I mean, 25-year-olds with college educations can’t get jobs in our culture,” says Nason. “So try and imagine being a small-town kid escaping to the city seeking somewhere safer. Queer kids—and trans kids in particular—have horrible experiences on our streets because they are easy targets.”

For the first time in 2013, SNA respondents were asked whether they identify as part of the LGBTQ community; one in five teens did. Military veterans also made their debut on the 2013 SNA list, which also found the average age of homeless people has continuously increased from 38 in 2006 to 42 in 2013; the share of seniors in the homeless population doubled from 5 per cent in 2009 to 10 per cent in 2013.

## **5. Are those with mental-health and addiction issues disproportionately represented?**

Pretty much. “The number of absolute homeless in the country living with mental illness is estimated to be about 119,000,” says Steve Lurie, executive director of the Toronto branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association. “When you include people with mental illness that are vulnerably housed, that number grows to 520,000.”

“If you put that in an Ontario context, you have about 40,000 homeless people with mental illness and 117,000 who are vulnerably housed. The GTA is about a third of that; 13,000 to 14,000 who are homeless with mental illness and well over 40,000 who are vulnerably housed in Toronto alone. These are evidence-based numbers. Panhandling is a symptom of our failure to provide people with housing and income.”

## **6. LCBO stores are magnets for panhandlers, so they must have a conduct policy, right?**

Wrong. “It’s something we are aware of and it’s something stores deal with—some more than others,” says Lisa Murray, senior communications consultant with LCBO. “But it’s generally dealt with at the store level on a case-by-case basis.

“If people are being especially aggressive or disruptive—if there is a public safety issue—we will contact property management or police. But our staff is very good at determining what, if any, appropriate action needs to be taken.”

## **7. What about local BIAs?**

Same: No specific policy in place, at least not at the Queen St. W. BIA or Parkdale Village BIA—two neighborhoods habitually targeted by panhandlers albeit at different ends of the spectrum (more youth in the former, older and more entrenched poor in the latter).

“Homelessness, poverty, and supporting people with mental health issues is such a big part of our neighbourhood,” says Anna Bartula, executive director of Parkdale Village BIA. “We have many organizations in our neighbourhood supporting people going through troubling times. So we are more about working together to help,” she says, adding that bicycle cops in the area are particularly accommodating.

“Both 14 Division and 52 Division—depending on what side of Spadina you are on—are very helpful in supporting the business community,” says Melissa Lam, executive director of the Queen St. West BIA. “Because police have good relationships with other city services, they can better manage any next steps involved.”

## **8. But aren’t some panhandlers scammers?**

Probably, and it sucks to think they might be diverting food money from a hungry person to buy drugs. But panhandling is still a horrendous way to live. “People don’t aspire to be homeless or to panhandle, to sit at somebody’s feet and have them walk by and maybe drop them a quarter,” says the CMHA’s Lurie.

Adds Nason of Loft Community Services, “The biggest misconception about panhandlers is that they’re lazy or apathetic. It’s not fun at all. Streets are unsafe, and people on the streets are very vulnerable.

“There are always the exceptions. I remember a story from a few years ago about a woman begging on the street who was followed home and discovered to be living in a lovely apartment with all the amenities. That’s the story we [as a society] cling to, because it alleviates our own guilt and apathy around this situation. But if people are out there on the street asking for money, they generally need it.”

## **9. Does forking over money keep people begging on the sidewalk?**

No, according to our experts. Spare change can actually help, albeit short-term. Plus, “there is a human aspect to contact,” Nason says. “That metaphor of a hand reaching out to help is real, even if it is just dropping a loonie in a hand.”

“Clearly, giving or not giving is a personal decision,” says Anderson of the SSHA. “But there are other ways to help create long-term solutions, perhaps by supporting community agencies that provide social housing or housing assistance or homelessness services that include helping people find and keep permanent housing.”

Adds Nason, “You could try saying something [to a panhandler] like, ‘You’re here because you’re here, but here is a list of shelters or social service agencies that might be helpful.’ Drop that in the hat with your 50 cents.”


## 10. In moments of extreme donor fatigue, try and remember that...

“Sometimes being on the street is safer than being at home—these people are often the most alienated, disenfranchised, and needy,” says Nason. “Something really sad has happened to put someone on the street.”

And maybe as a city, we should be more curious about what that sad thing is—and how we can collectively combat it—instead of just huffily marching past.

**TAGS** *Homelessness, Housing, Joe Mihevc, LCBO, poverty*

**post a comment** 

Latest 

**dittomuch**

I can understand begging and I'm sympathetic however there is a real limit to the understanding. Begging for change inside a mall, at an ATM, in a food court isn't acceptable nor is begging in libraries or on transit.

But it isn't 'panhandling' the correct term is begging. See there is a negative connotation to the term and a very real and reasonable stigma to begging.

 0  2

4:06 pm on April 24, 2014

 Reply  Report

**sadday**

I made the same money panhandling as I did busking a Business Improvement Area event. BIA's are sleazy that use buskers at events. A cheap way for free entertainment and the business makes a profit in not paying the artist.

I'd panhandle before I ever work for a BIA for free.

 7  3

8:12 am on April 11, 2014

 Reply  Report

### Not that sad

I take it you're either a very good panhandler, or a terrible busker. Or both. 😊

Busking is hardly working for free, when there's a general expectation that a lot of your audience (if they liked you) will be giving you money.

If you aren't making it rain, maybe you should consider why. Maybe research a better area since obviously not all spots are created equal. But honestly with that attitude, you don't seem like a fun busker anyway.

 5  2

1:51 pm on April 11, 2014

 Report

### Erin

My ex-husband enjoys being homeless. He is a charmer that gets money given to him while he sits about on the sidewalk in front of Tim's, the LCBO and downtown hospitals. He does not have to pay rent or bills or go to work. He has no responsibilities. If he wants a free meal, he can get 3 squares a day. He knows where to go to get a shower and new-to-him clothes. His social worker has tried to place him in an apartment on a few occasions, but he ends up sleeping on the balcony and then back on the street he goes. Even though he has had his jaw broken and his shoulder cracked, been mugged and had knives put against his ribs by other homeless people, he still claims to be having the time of his life with his little lost boy friends. What does he do with the money given to him as he panhandles or from the government (tax dollars)? He buys drugs and donuts. Every few months, his family may hear from him. Unfortunately, not everyone wants to be helped. Handouts seem to be a very temporary measure that does not bring about too much improvement. Housing did not work for him. Job placement and training did not help him. Drug rehab did not help him. Again, you must want to be helped.

 18  13

12:32 am on April 11, 2014

 Reply  Report

### David Escribe

Sounds like your husband has a mental health issue above anything else. No wonder he left your uncompassionate ass.

 4  5

8:19 am on April 15, 2014

 Report

### Larry Thomas

Much more of a problem than panhandling I believe are those who are paid to solicit for charitable organizations. These people usually work in 'pairs' and are presumably instructed to solicit while blocking both sides of the sidewalk. You have to run a gauntlet through the middle in order to get through them. You cannot escape them.

They get you coming and going. And they are everywhere often more than one 'pair' on a block. This practice needs to be controlled or better still eliminated. It is much more pervasive than the average panhandler.

 37  1

 **Charlieman**

When they block me like you've described, they get my shoulder as I pass by. But they usually get out of the way at the last split second. Try it next time you're under attack, it works!

 11  3

9:04 am on April 11, 2014

 [Report](#)

 **metric**

'Sick Kids' – who's name is designed to pull at your guilt – is one of the wealthiest organizations in the country. They just spent 100's of millions on state of the art new buildings – and they run one of the most pervasive street solicitation networks.

 10  2

11:45 am on April 11, 2014

 [Report](#)

 **David**

The best way to deal with these suburban kids selling charity crap on the sidewalks is a very loud and clear Fuck Off! Clears them right out of the way and they never come near you. I Am A Girl assholes are the worst. But there are so many meek little micepeople in this city. As the woman above says, her husband lives the street in the drugs and panhandling life because it is free and fun. For many there, it is a way to be a microlevel street rock star in their own minds. Social agencies should provide web sites with small business cards that list the major shelters and food services and so on instead of cash the public can give panhandlers the card with social service info on it. You are helping them though they may spit on you for doing so. No answer to this problem as long as the city is a magnet for men who are losers in their home towns and think they can make it big with no skills, alcohol and anger issues and no money in the shiny city. Crazy. Yes. Completely. It was the same in the 1970s and is just as bad now in the 2010s.

 10  11

12:16 pm on April 11, 2014

 [Report](#)

 **Chuggers**

"Chugging" (charity mugging) is the way to describe them. They also love targeting people near universities too, as if someone paying \$5000/term has money... it's annoying because they always want you to sign up to be a regular donor, which is where the money's at. They are not interested in your one-time donations.

Charity mugging is a lucrative business. People that do that are not volunteers and are in fact paid decent wages. Of course, that means expenses, and it's really only the bigger charities that can afford this. You're not really going to see a small grass roots charity that is actually hurting for cash with a teamster of 20 people on a block. I don't know, I'm not saying organizations like Sick Kids don't do good work, but things like this just doesn't jive well with me.

 15  0

1:59 pm on April 11, 2014

 [Report](#)

 **dittomuch**

I have 100% stopped giving to all charities that use these tactics.

 1  0

4:12 pm on April 24, 2014

 [Report](#)

## R. Reiter

What about corporate pan-handling? Youth today are trained that it's ok to solicit for charitable causes. Witness all the youth who work for companies like Public Outreach, located in Kensington Market, and wear corporate logo's for Agencies like St. Stephens Community House or Because I am a Girl.

Some of these people, who's entire income comes from this type of pan-handling are the most aggressive solicitors on the street. It doesn't matter how sweetly you call out have a nice day to someone who walks by you, you are still being aggressive. I mean if I ignore you, that means I don't want any contact with you or your cause.

At least most individual pan-handlers respect this fact.

 40  2

11:41 am on April 10, 2014

 Reply  Report

## alecto

Agreed!!! These corporate panhandlers are FAR more aggressive than 99% of the homeless panhandlers I've ever encountered. What a nuisance!

 20  1

11:59 pm on April 10, 2014

 Report

## B. Smythe

I believe the term is "chuggers", or "charity muggers."

 9  0

6:55 am on April 11, 2014

 Report

## SeeEss

What's your point? Just ignore them. You're a big boy/girl. You aren't required to stop and engage with everyone who motions to you on the street

 5  2

10:22 am on April 11, 2014

 Report

## Michelle

I was homeless for a long time and I wished that panhandling had been my practice for earning money. I was lost to addiction and resorted to much more damaging practices. i lost part of my soul on the mean streets of Toronto.

Today, however, my soul restored, I am happy to report I'm fully recovered from my addiction. I am an aspiring writer and passionate about the plight of the homeless. I've never passed a panhandler by without dropping what ever change I have into somebody's outreached hand or upturned ball cap. Furthermore, once I give the money to the panhandler, it ceases to belong to me and none of my business where they spend it.

 29  9

9:01 am on April 10, 2014

 Reply  Report

## steve

"Furthermore, once I give the money to the panhandler, it ceases to belong to me and none of my business where they spend it."

There in lies the reason why endless spending on this issue won't change a thing. The number one cause of people who are homeless especially long term homeless is being an addict. Another 6 pack isn't going to lift anyone out of anything. Just like if back in the day when you had a drug problem someone handing you money didn't improve your life any.

 0  0

3:15 am on April 17, 2014

 Report

### Mary W. Walters

Good article. Thanks. I'm more likely to share some change after reading this.

 24  3

9:34 am on April 9, 2014

 Reply  Report

### Jack

Share your change so they can buy cigarettes. Look at the photo in the article again. No sir, nothing from me. They are not homeless, they are bums. Get a job.

 9  26

4:00 pm on April 10, 2014

 Report

### kristi276

I live in the Big Apple and there are a lot of homeless in the Manhattan area. The demographics are much different than in Toronto, but the problem is here non the same. Because of sky-high rents and condos that cost your next of kin, people are finding t hat t here is no such thing as affordable housing (for the working class). Many people in the shelter system are part of the working poor; for t hey have jobs that don;t pay enough to afford the rents. We are reliving the roaring twenties were the rich got sup;er rich and the poor got sup;er poor. Homeless activists used to say that a cold in the states was influenza in the colonies (including Canada)

 21  3

3:16 am on April 9, 2014

 Reply  Report

### Hardeep Singh

I am not religious by any means. However, Sikhism is a great religion if not the greatest BECAUSE 24/7/365 there is always food served to the public at EVERY SINGLE SIKH TEMPLE in the world and there are thousands in Canada and thousands in America. This is the only religion that has this fundamental inclusion in the religions belief system itself. So.... If its food that they need, tell them they can go there, however they cannot be intoxicated regardless of their sorrows.

 34  11

12:36 am on April 9, 2014

 Reply  Report

### Jules

This is true. Are there any Gurdwara's in downtown Toronto? Do Gurdwara's participate in the Out of The Cold Program? I know that synagogues and churches do. Maan, once you're homeless it is hard to get back up, especially if you've burned bridges and you have no family to help u.

 10  2

2:55 am on April 9, 2014

 Report



↪ **Anne**

Sorry I clicked on the wrong button. I think feeding the needy in any house of worship is commendable, and am glad to hear of yet another opportunity to give people a hand up when they have hit rock bottom.

 12  3

7:54 am on April 9, 2014

 Report

↪ **DiCK**

24/7? Really?

I know food is served and shared at Sikh temples, but what outreach are the temples doing? Is food being brought to the hungry?

 3  9

12:33 pm on April 10, 2014

 Report

↪ **SeeEss**

@DiCK – I hate this attitude. “The good you’re doing is not good enough, so it doesn’t count”. It’s so moronic and gets us nowhere.

 8  2

10:52 am on April 11, 2014

 Report

**Patrick**

hopefully we can all have compassion for people on the street and recognize that we live in a society where people do not have equal opportunities. nobody is panhandling because it's a choice, or for lack of personal responsibility. poverty and homelessness are systemic issues, and anyone who thinks people can just 'get a job' has clearly had a relatively easy and privileged life.

of course there's always that one in a thousand who some hold up as proof. see!? this one person scraped their way our of poverty, so anyone can do it. that's bullshit. none of us are born on equal footing, and those of us who live through poverty, abuse, systemic discrimination, etc through no fault of our own often end up in the margins of society with little chance of getting out. add to that the stigma and psychological trauma of being abandoned by society, and a totally inadequate social safety net, and you have homelessness, and panhandling. i'm not sorry if it's unsightly for those of you born into arbitrary comfort.

but even if you're a sociopathic sack of shit who only cares about bottom lines, it would be cheaper to provide free housing and free food for street people than it is to maintain them in the shelter/prison/hospital system. social determinants of health, yo! but sadly we live in a time and place where the victims are blamed and then victimized some more for being victims. yaaay democracy.

 39  3

12:27 am on April 9, 2014

 Reply  Report

**debsee\_66991**

Are you kidding me? Give the guy a loonie. Seriously, are you people so cruel? It is not that easy to just 'get a job'. It is hard to even get Welfare if you do not have a permanent address and you can't get an address without money, vicious circle. Having a disability (Mental) makes it almost impossible for these people to get jobs. Tim Hortons, which is the company you have referred to, is actually a pretty hard place to get a job at, you have to have a resume, a good resume or experience, and education. They do not, nor do many other companys, just hire anyone. Yes the city offers many food programs, but they do not offer transportation to these places, many of these are far and few between. I am really disscusted by some of these comments. It is something this city NEEDS to work harder at, don't try and hide or cover up the problem, HELP FIX it. I am shocked at some of you. Not everyone

is trying to screw you, some people need YOUR help. If you gave someone a dollar today, could you still afford the gas for your Mercedes? Would it kill you to hand someone a dollar for a meal on your way to a fancy restaurant? Just like you people are sick of the homeless, I am sick of the greed and selfishness. You never know, it could be you someday.

 37  10

12:11 am on April 9, 2014

 Reply  Report

## Jason

Actually, just a thought:

Make panhandling completely illegal? In return, create jobs for welfare screeners, with a “no turndown” policy, to assess each individual’s NEEDS and enable funding or products.

Far less money to purchase substances with...

and I know from experience that free meals, toiletries and chances to get clean are abundant in the city.

 5  23

11:37 pm on April 8, 2014

 Reply  Report

## Patrick

yeah. welfare has been a total disaster anywhere it’s been tried. and if you want to start arresting people for being poor and asking for help, i’m afraid you might be leaning in the direction of fascism. how about sending them all to an island or something?

and sadly, your experience is the exception, not the rule. if free meals and chances to get clean were as abundant as you seem to think, we wouldn’t be having this discussion.

 22  3

12:07 am on April 9, 2014

 Report

## Ana

Actually, in Portugal it’s forbidden to ask for money on the streets (of course no cop ever endorses that law, because it was made essentially to prevent criminals to declare they were just panhandling and the victim got scared).

The main problem with the homeless usually is more psychological than physical. Many don’t know how to/don’t want to live by established society rules. Some don’t even think they’re worthy of having a home because of what they’ve done (or what was done to them). I don’t know about Toronto, I only was there for a few months, but here in Portugal available shelters are not that great. Sure, they give you food and a place to sleep, but some people told me they felt safer on the streets because every time they slept in a shelter they got mugged or beaten.

These are people that have suffered a lot and got broken along the way... In my opinion (next to basic necessities, of course) the key is in psychological aid, but it’s also hard to get them to accept it. There is no easy fix. But what I’ve learnt is that it can happen to pretty much anyone.

 13  0

5:14 am on April 9, 2014

 Report

## Fillibuster

The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread.

— Anatole France

6 0

1:28 pm on April 10, 2014

Report

1 2