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## From Lemons to Lemonade

## An Ethnographic Sketch of Late Twentieth-century Panhandling

Louisa R. Stark

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*A rise in the number of panhandlers on the streets of this country has given rise to the promulgation of ordinances outlawing this activity. Although there has been a great deal of press and litigation revolving around such public policy, little is known about homeless panhandlers. This article reviews the rather limited information about what is known of the sociodemographics of panhandling. Strategies used by panhandlers in pursuing their occupation are described, along with their own perceptions of their occupation. Services available to this population are discussed, along with some suggestions for resolving the problems associated with panhandling on America's streets.*

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**T**he 1980s may be characterized as the decade of the homeless. Numerous catastrophic events, including massive deindustrialization, salaries and welfare benefits at a level too low to maintain even the most rudimentary livelihood, and a series of recessionary cycles have caused thousands of Americans to lose their economic underpinnings and become homeless. As numbers grow, public and private service providers have been able to impact the need for services for homeless people only minimally. This has led to an increase of homeless and poor people who have begun turning in increasing numbers to begging.

As the numbers of mendicants have grown, complaints about begging have led to the development of public policy to deal with the problem. In 1987, Seattle passed a law making "aggressive panhandling" punishable by ninety days in jail or a \$500 fine. In 1988, Minneapolis passed a similar ordinance, as did Atlanta and Dallas in 1991. Miami promulgated an ordinance against begging in general in 1988, while New York City enacted a law specifically against panhandling in subways in 1989.<sup>1</sup> Although these laws have been put forth in an attempt to regulate public behavior that discomfits the citizenry, they appear to have been passed with little knowledge or understanding of who panhandlers are and why begging is on the rise in urban America.

This article attempts to broaden our understanding of contemporary mendicancy, beginning with a discussion of the public's perceptions of panhandlers, followed by

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an examination of some of the demographic and social characteristics of this subgroup of homeless people. The next focus is on the entrepreneurial strategies of panhandlers along with their own perceptions regarding their occupation, including, whenever possible, the voices of informants. The relationship between mendicants and available welfare and homeless services is reviewed. I conclude with a few suggestions for resolving the problem of panhandling on America's streets.

Research for this study has been conducted over the past ten years, and is based on participant observation carried on in connection with my administration of several housing programs and research projects dealing with homelessness. Although the study was carried out in Phoenix, I hope that its conclusions may be applicable to other urban areas.

This article focuses on the kind of mendicancy known as panhandling. The contemporary definition of panhandling combines the notion of begging with a story of need, which is generally perceived as not matching the manner in which money given will be spent. The term "panhandling" also embodies an element of assertion. Panhandlers are seen as proactively asking for money, not simply standing or sitting and waiting for it to come their way.<sup>2</sup>

The public perception is that there are large and persistently growing numbers of panhandlers. This may be partly due to the fact that panhandlers are often the only direct contact an average citizen has with a homeless person. When such an interaction occurs, with an often disheveled stranger invading the personal space of an unsuspecting citizen, the individual approached may believe that (1) the situation is a dangerous one, and (2) that all homeless people are panhandlers. Part of the perception of danger may be related to the fact that today, as distinct from earlier times, many panhandlers are young men who are perceived as being stronger, and thus more potentially dangerous, than the stereotypical older mendicant of the past. The intensity of feeling about the contact may make the problem seem larger than it actually is. In fact, the actual percentage of homeless people who panhandle is low, although growing. A study of homelessness in Minneapolis-St. Paul has shown that the total number of homeless people who reported that they panhandled increased from 8.8 percent in 1989 to 12 percent in 1990.<sup>3</sup> Studies of homelessness between 1985 and 1989<sup>4</sup> reveal the data on panhandling shown in Table 1.

Unlike the old Anglo man who was the stereotypical panhandler of the past, the modern street beggar is generally representative in age and ethnicity of the general homeless population; he or she is generally young<sup>5</sup> and a member of a minority group.<sup>6</sup> For example, in a comparison of two shelters in New York, only 4.1 percent of men over the age of forty-five indicated that any of their income came from panhandling, whereas 14.2 percent of the men staying in a shelter that catered to younger clients reported income from asking strangers for money.<sup>7</sup> In Phoenix, the majority of panhandlers are young African-American or Native American men. However, like the mendicant of the past, the modern panhandler is generally addicted to alcohol and/or drugs.

The modern panhandler often considers begging a job,<sup>8</sup> in many ways an entrepreneurial enterprise. He is out to make money in the most efficient manner possible. This includes setting up shop in an optimal business location, selecting clients who will be receptive to his sales message, and developing a sales pitch that will convince a potential client that his product (himself) is worth an investment at a reasonable price.

Table 1

City	Percentage
Washington, D.C. <sup>a</sup>	34.4%
Chicago <sup>b</sup>	24%
New York <sup>c</sup>	14.2%
Los Angeles <sup>d</sup>	13.4%
Milwaukee <sup>e</sup>	13%
Denver <sup>f</sup>	6.8%
Nationwide <sup>g</sup>	17%

Source Notes

- a. Kathleen H. Dockett, *Street Homeless People in the District of Columbia: Characteristics and Service Needs* (Washington, D.C.: University of the District of Columbia, 1989), 36. Homeless individuals living on the streets were interviewed at meal sites. When asked the question, "In the past thirty days where did you receive money from?" 34.4 percent mentioned panhandling.
- b. Peter H. Rossi, Gene A. Fisher, and Georgianna Willis, *The Condition of the Homeless of Chicago* (Amherst, Mass.: Social and Demographic Research Institute, University of Chicago, September 1986), 88. In 1985 and 1986, surveys were conducted of 722 homeless people staying in shelters and on the streets, of whom 24 percent reported that they engaged in panhandling.
- c. Merv Goldstein, Stephen Levine, and Robert Lipkins, *Characteristics of Shelter Users* (New York: Adult Services Agency, Bureau of Management Information Systems, Human Resources Administration, City of New York, April 8, 1986), 17. In this study 14.2 percent of men staying at a shelter "designated to receive clients brought in by outreach efforts" stated that a current source of income was panhandling.
- d. Roger K. Farr, Paul Koegel, and Audrey Burnam, *A Study of Mental Illness in the Skid Row Area of Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Department of Mental Health, March 1986), 205. Respondents were 300 homeless individuals who availed themselves of beds in missions, hotel rooms (through vouchers), or shelters, who used free meal services and indoor day programs, or who were hanging around on the streets. When asked about their sources of income, 13.4 percent responded that they received money from panhandling.
- e. Mark Rosnow, Toni Shaw, and Clare Stapleton Concord, *Listening to the Homeless: A Study of Homeless Mentally Ill Persons in Milwaukee* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Human Services Triangle, April 1985), 17. In 1984 and 1985, interviews were conducted with 237 homeless individuals living in temporary shelters or on the streets. Of the total, 13 percent admitted that they earned money occasionally by "asking for change."
- f. John Parvensky and Don Krasniewski, *In Search of a Place to Call Home: A Profile of Homelessness in Colorado* (Denver: Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, October 1988), 22. A total of 814 homeless individuals were interviewed in soup lines, shelters, on the streets, and at emergency service centers. When asked their primary source of income during the prior month, 6.8 percent stated that it was "money from strangers."
- g. Martha R. Burt and Barbara E. Cohen, *America's Homeless: Numbers, Characteristics, and Programs That Serve Them*, Urban Institute Report 89-3 (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, July 1989), 43. Data were collected from 1,704 "homeless adult users of soup kitchens and shelters in cities of 100,000 population or larger (36) who were asked to list their current sources of income. Seventeen percent listed "handouts" as a source.

**Business Locations**

Locations for panhandling generally fall into two general categories: sites that are close to a source of liquor (or drugs) where the panhandler will spend his or her hard-earned cash, and locations where the potential donor will have cash already in his or her hand, thus making it difficult to make up an excuse of having no spare change.

Panhandlers who prefer to work the streets in proximity to liquor stores or bars may often be found in the downtown commercial areas of larger cities. Such locales usually boast a few pre-urban renewal bars still frequented by homeless and poor skid row men. Downtown commercial areas are also preferred by certain panhandlers because, as Calvin, a forty-two-year-old panhandler in Phoenix, explains, "You can blend in. There are always a lot of people on the street. You can also simply move away with the crowd when you see the cops coming along."

The same informant, referring to the positive aspect of crowded downtown streets, adds, "It's not like being on an empty street, and approaching some guy who's scared shitless when he sees you coming towards him. You scare them too much and they run for cover, or worse yet, for a cop."

Panhandlers also work people in cars. This generally occurs at intersections in front of a liquor store. In this style of panhandling, there is no pretense on the part of the panhandler — the money will be used for alcohol. For the person being hit up, the experience is one of mixed reactions. While the car serves as a physical barrier between driver and panhandler, the fact that the vehicle is usually forced to be in a stationary position by a traffic light may lead to a good deal of discomfort on the part of the driver, who may feel trapped and at the mercy of the panhandler.

As in many other cities, panhandling ordinances in Phoenix are most often enforced in the downtown commercial area. Thus, a number of panhandlers prefer to locate their operations elsewhere, fanning out into nearby neighborhoods where alcohol can be purchased in supermarkets and drugstores, along with food, aspirin, and diapers. Such locations are becoming more frequent sites of panhandling. However, unlike a direct request for money with which to purchase alcohol made in proximity to a bar or liquor store, truth in advertising becomes somewhat shaky when the plea is delivered in front of a supermarket or drugstore. There the money is said to be for food or medication or, in the case of women, to purchase diapers. Rita, a homeless alcoholic explains.

It's much easier for me to make a few [dollars] standing in front of Safeway [a local supermarket] for food and diapers for my kids. People are going to give to me because they think I'm going to go right into the store and spend the money that I collected. I can get money much faster than I can downtown. Down there, nobody is going to believe that I'm going to take their money, hop a bus, and go buy the stuff. But if you're standing right in front of a place where they sell the things you're asking for, then folks are more apt to believe your story.

Rita has no children!

Alcohol is sold in convenience stores, which also sell gasoline. It is therefore not uncommon to find panhandlers standing near gas pumps asking for money because "I ran out of gas" or "I just got a job, but I don't have enough money for gas to get there" or "My car broke down on the freeway, and I need to get it towed." In Phoenix, some panhandlers have become so ingenious that they tote old dented gas cans to "prove" their need.

Panhandlers are often found around locations where a "hit" will have cash in hand, so that it is difficult to deny having spare change. Many Phoenix panhandlers have concluded that panhandling is best carried out where citizens are already engaged in a financial transaction. They believe that a second transaction, making a "donation" to a panhandler, can be more easily induced once a purse or billfold has been opened for another purpose. Locales such as parking meters, phone booths, and automatic teller machines are often frequented. As Ed, a young high school dropout in his early twenties states,

You might call my beat the parking lots around City Hall. I go up to people who are just about to feed a parking meter. They already have some change in their hand, so they can't [say] that they don't have any money. Usually I get just a couple of coins. But I'd say almost everyone I approach gives me something.

A close second to the money-in-hand technique is the money-just-spent or money- about-to-be-spent strategy. This is often associated with locations like restaurants and food stores. As Leon, a forty-three-year-old longtime street person and alcoholic relates,

I usually stand near the Matador [a downtown restaurant]. You can hit up people going into the restaurant for a meal, or just when they're leaving. They've just paid for a good meal, or are just about to, and they see me looking hungry and, well, before I know it I have the change I need.

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### Customer Profiles

Besides a good choice of location, a successful panhandler usually has an idea of who will be his most successful "hits." For example, the downtown area of many large cities is viewed as a place to interact with conventioners and tourists, who are often seen as easy marks. As Joe, a twenty-seven-year-old Phoenix panhandler, explains, "Tourists are great. They're on vacation, feeling good about themselves. They're spending a lot of money anyway, so what's a little more thrown in."

Other beliefs associated with potential generosity include the assumption that a man accompanied by a woman will respond to being hit up more readily than two men together or one man alone. As Mark, a veteran panhandler, remarks,

Couples are almost always sure marks, especially if it looks like they're out for a big night. The guy, who's going to spend a lot of money to impress his girl, doesn't want to take any chances that she might be put off if he's doesn't help a poor guy like me. He's also probably feeling somehow guilty that he's going to be spending all that money on one night with his woman, when there's a poor person like me asking him for a little thirty-three cents to help me get on a bus.

In general, most male and female panhandlers agree that women are not easily approachable. Les, a "pro," explains: "It's hard to get anything out of a woman. It seems they think that if they open up their purse to give you something that you're going to grab it and take off."

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### Marketing Strategies

Besides the importance of location and type of potential "hit" one approaches, the nature of the request plays an important role in the equation. As noted, there is often a nexus between the site of the panhandling and the kind of appeal made, namely Ed, who panhandles around the parking meters at City Hall, asks for change to buy gas for his car; Rita, who operates in front of a supermarket, requests money for diapers; and Joe, who works the streets near the bus depot, always asks for bus fare. The object of the request, however, rarely matches the expenditure of the donation, which more often than not is used to pay for alcohol or drugs. The exceptions are the few panhandlers who honestly request money to buy a drink — but never drugs! Eva is an example. Standing in front of a liquor store, she often asks passersby for "fifty cents to start a quart." Eva relates that her hits often give her a dollar, and tell her to go buy herself a whole quart. Such are the rewards of honesty!

Finally, like sales personnel everywhere, many panhandlers conclude a business transaction with "Have a nice day!" even when their solicitation has been turned

down. In fact, as Al, a thirty-two-year-old homeless man reports, “I don’t know why, but sometimes I really get a kick out of telling someone to have a nice day after they’ve turned me down. I know they’re squirming inside — feeling guilty that they didn’t want to help me out.”

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### **Pricing**

Although a well-known Phoenix panhandler generally asks a hit for a million dollars, there is usually a relationship between the amount of money requested and the object for which it will purportedly be spent. For example, a panhandler may ask for eighty cents for bus fare or a dollar for a gallon of gas. In some cases, Phoenix panhandlers simply ask for an unspecified amount of money to purchase gas, food, diapers, and so forth. The exact amount is not mentioned; it is left to the hit to decide the amount necessary to purchase such articles. Finally, some panhandlers ask for a specific sum of money necessary to complete the total necessary for a purchase. Harry, a veteran panhandler, always asks for thirty cents.

I always show them a couple of quarters, and tell them that I only need thirty cents more for bus fare [eighty cents]. Of course, you know me well enough to know that eighty cents is what a pint of “T-Bird” [Thunderbird, a brand of fortified wine] costs. But the average Joe walking down the streets is real impressed that I’ve gotten most of the money I need, and is probably more apt to give me what I ask for.

As a staff member of a social service agency once noted: “It’s almost as if [panhandlers] are aware of the concept of ‘matching funds.’ I suppose if it works in grant writing, the same psychology should work on the streets.”

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### **Profits**

Income from panhandling is generally limited. In a 1986 study of homelessness in Chicago, the average income reported from panhandling was \$7.00 per month. This may be partially explained by the fact that panhandling is generally not a daily occurrence. For example, in a 1986 study carried out in Los Angeles, of the 13.4 percent of homeless people interviewed who admitted to panhandling, only one percent stated that panhandling constituted their whole income, 2.2 percent mentioned that it made up most of their income, and 10.2 percent stated that it comprised only part of their income.<sup>10</sup> Panhandling is generally engaged in when other economic resources, such as earnings, money from family or friends, sale of plasma, or “dumpster diving” — scavenging for recyclable goods — have been exhausted.

Earnings are rarely saved. They are spent on short-term purchases, generally alcohol or drugs, occasionally food. Since the amount earned is minuscule, there is no reason to try to save it for housing, even in an SRO hotel. As Melvin, a thirty-two-year-old alcoholic reports, “There’s no way that I could save any of the money that I get on the streets. Even if I could get in, the Golden West [a local SRO hotel] would charge me \$8.00 a night. I’m lucky if I make \$2.00 a day.”

Beyond this, saving the money and carrying it around can only lead to being robbed, and possibly being beaten up in the process. This being the case, the average Phoenix panhandler works the streets only until he or she has enough money to

purchase a bottle of beer or fortified wine, a vial of crack, or, rarely, a meal at a fast-food restaurant.

The alcoholic drinks the beer or wine with the intention of getting as intoxicated as possible. At that point, barely able to walk, or having passed out, the panhandler obviously has to postpone further panhandling to another day, or until the person returns to some semblance of sobriety.

Many long-term alcoholics find that they do not need to consume large quantities of alcohol to become intoxicated. A couple of swallows of fortified wine often suffice. Since the alcoholic does not require a whole bottle, the remains of which would be stolen once he became intoxicated, he often joins an impromptu "bottle gang" of like individuals with whom he combines his earnings to purchase alcohol. The group meets, usually in front of a liquor store, and decides to raise the necessary funds. They may decide to divide the cost of the alcohol evenly, each individual panhandling to collect his quota. Or each member panhandles for a specific length of time, perhaps an hour, returning with whatever he has been able to raise. Once this arrangement is made, it is a point of honor that each person adds every penny collected to the pot. The quality and quantity of liquor bought is determined by the amount of money collected. Those who join a bottle gang make their earnings go further and are thus able to spend less time panhandling. Sharing the cost of the bottle, as well as the bottle itself, ensures each member enough alcohol to become intoxicated, while avoiding waste of money or liquor. Charles, a recovering alcoholic and former panhandler recalls:

When I was on the street, I found that two or three swigs and I'd be gone — passed out. So if you bought a whole jug [bottle of fortified wine] you'd just sip a little, pass out, and then it would be gone. Somebody would walk off with the rest. Then you'd come to in an hour or so and need some more. And you'd have to figure out how to get another jug. So it was much better to share, with everyone taking a few swigs. That's a much better way to do it. That way you weren't paying a lot for what you didn't drink.

Homeless mendicants either embrace or distance themselves from their role as panhandlers.<sup>11</sup> Kevin, a nineteen-year-old drug user, is one who distances himself from panhandling. He tells a listener that he never panhandles. In fact, his source of income, he says, comes from an inheritance left him by his uncle. Yet further queries reveal that Kevin was kicked out of high school at the age of sixteen for drug abuse, his family disowned him, and he has been in and out of the correctional system ever since. Only recently has he begun supporting himself selling plasma and panhandling. When Kevin finally admits that he secures most of his income from panhandling, he adds, "You know, I gotta be stoned to do it. There's no way I can go up to someone and ask them for money straight. It's really demeaning. It just goes against my grain."

Homeless people who distance themselves from their roles as panhandlers have generally spent less time on the streets than those who embrace the identity.<sup>12</sup> Marvin, a thirty-six-year-old alcoholic, embraces the role. He had been homeless for two years before he decided to "clean up." When interviewed, he had spent three of the previous six months in a detox program. After that, he had been employed as a property manager until he started drinking again and lost his job. Homeless once more, he started supporting himself by panhandling. He called his former employer

to report, "God, it's great to be out [on the streets] again. It's always an adventure. They call me Ghost Walker [Marvin is Native American], but I call myself Joe Walker, because I come and go."

Not surprisingly, those who embrace panhandling share the belief that there is nothing dishonorable about this activity. When criticized, many panhandlers testify that they see no difference between asking for money for their own needs, and the practice of charitable organizations that request funds, often on the streets, to help the poor. Julie, an articulate young woman who was arrested for panhandling in front of a drugstore, was furious when a case manager at a social service agency confronted her over the incident.

Who the hell do you think you are, criticizing me for panhandling. I see you doing the same thing, yourself. Almost every night I see you on TV, begging for money from the public to help the homeless. And I hear that woman at CASS [a local emergency shelter] telling people that they should give to the shelter instead of to us directly. And you guys are always saying that we need to be "empowered," but you don't want us to be allowed to raise money for ourselves — for our own needs as we determine them. You know, it's all a bunch of crock.

Ed, a veteran panhandler, holds much the same opinion.

I hear all this business about how we poor stiffs go around asking for money for food and stuff like that when all we're really interested in is spending it on alcohol. I think that's called truth in advertising. But I also see those charity people begging for money, saying that it's all going to go directly to helping homeless families. You know that's not the truth. Only a very little goes directly to anyone. They use most of it to pay themselves big salaries. It's all a big racket.

Similarities between panhandling by homeless people and solicitation by charitable organizations have also been noted by the National Coalition for the Homeless. In an article discussing the repeal of Cincinnati's panhandling ordinance, the coalition states: "This controversy raises the question why people think it is okay for the Salvation Army 'Santa Claus' to ask for donations which will help homeless people, but why it is not okay for homeless persons to ask for donations to help themselves directly."<sup>13</sup> And in their attempt to overturn the New York City ordinance outlawing panhandling in the subways, attorneys for the two homeless plaintiffs argue that their clients "are entitled to the same constitutional protections as charitable solicitors under a string of Supreme Court rulings that sharply limit the right of government authorities to regulate fund-raising efforts."<sup>14</sup>

Part of the reason for the negative attitude that panhandlers often have of charitable organizations may come about because they generally do not, or cannot, avail themselves of their services. Many of the nation's homeless programs, including emergency shelters, do not serve homeless people who have been drinking heavily or who are under the influence of drugs.<sup>15</sup> Since there are never enough beds available for those who need them, shelter administrators can pick and choose those they assist, so substance abusers are often not served. As the administrator of a Phoenix shelter explains:

We have made some priorities. First we help the most vulnerable homeless — families with children and the elderly and disabled. Our next priority are single workingmen and -women. We don't have a policy of not helping substance

abusers. But when they come in under the influence, they can be very unruly. My staff also feels that they've made a choice. They could have spent their money on a place to stay, but instead they use it to buy alcohol or drugs. My employees don't feel very kindly towards alcohol and drug users. If there were a distinction between deserving and undeserving homeless people, I'm afraid they'd classify the substance abuser as undeserving.

Bill, a thirty-six-year-old panhandler who is also an alcohol and drug abuser, reports on his experience with a shelter for the homeless:

Yeah, I was eighty-sixed [evicted] from CASS. I came in drunk and stoned out of my mind one night, and one of the intake guys took one look at me and kicked my ass out. I mean, I've been permanently eighty-sixed from there. But, shit, the place is really a dump. They're always telling you what you can do, and what you can't. They're worse than the army, and I should know what I'm talking about. After spending four years in 'Nam, I don't need to put up with that kind of shit. I don't need a shelter to be able to take care of myself.

Because of shelter policies, many homeless alcoholics find themselves relegated to a life on the streets, without access to social services. As a result, homeless substance abusers are often denied the one service from which they could most benefit, detoxification. In Phoenix, access to a public detox program necessitates a referral from a social service agency. However, even for a shelter resident who may receive a referral, there is often a six- to eight-week wait for a bed in the program. Many homeless substance abusers simply cannot wait that long and, unable to control their addiction, find themselves evicted from their emergency housing and back on the streets. As "Rambo," a thirty-eight-year-old alcoholic reports:

About a year ago I decided that I wanted to clean up my act. I actually sobered up long enough to get into CASS so I could get a referral to the LARC [local county alcohol recovery center]. When my case manager called, they told her that it would be a six-week wait. I tried real hard to remain sober, but couldn't hack it after two weeks. One day, after getting off work [casual labor], I was walking back to the shelter with a couple of other guys who'd just gotten paid. One of them had a bottle, and we started drinking. That was the night I was eighty-sixed from the shelter, for being late and loaded. So the detox program went down the tubes. I guess I'll never get straight. It's just too hard to do in this town.

Homeless people, once back on the streets, attempt to face life with a certain amount of bravado. They often talk about how sleeping on the streets is preferable to staying at a shelter and, in the case of panhandling, the positive challenge of this form of economic activity. However, one should not be tricked into thinking that the life of a street person is all freedom and pleasure. The fact is that few homeless people have much if any freedom, if freedom is defined as choice. The average homeless person is offered very few alternatives that are more rewarding than life on the streets.<sup>16</sup>

To a homeless person the choice of the street over a shelter, for example, may either be no choice at all (if he or she has been evicted because of an infraction of rules), or may have been a limited choice if the shelter was deemed to be less safe than the streets. Yet whatever the limited choice, it is pursued positively. Snow and Anderson point out "the tendency for individuals who have fallen through cracks of society to carve out a modicum of meaning and personal significance."<sup>17</sup>

In many ways panhandlers, whose activities are severely stigmatized by the rest of society, have developed techniques and strategies that have enabled them to endow their economic undertakings with a positive meaning and significance. However, it is also true that such individuals, in more sanguine moments, can be quite objective about themselves and their situation. Linda, a twenty-eight-year-old alcoholic, talks about her life:

I got married when I was sixteen. We lived with his parents, and had two kids. My husband and I were drinking so much that finally my in-laws kicked us out. So we left for Phoenix, 'cause my husband thought he could get a job. And we wouldn't be bothering anybody with the way we lived. Robert found a job welding, and I got pregnant again. But when the baby was born, the state took him away from us. [The baby was born with fetal alcohol syndrome.] Robert blamed me for the baby's problems, and one night he came home and beat the shit out of me. I called the police and they threw him in jail. Without him I couldn't keep the apartment, so I'm on the streets.

Everybody loves me here. Maybe it's 'cause I'm so good at getting money. All I gotta do is smile and hold out my hand, and I have enough for a jug. Am I happy? Well, sure. Everybody loves me, and I can get as drunk as I want to. And nobody can tell me what to do — not my husband, not his parents — nobody. But you know, sometimes early in the morning I think about the res [reservation], and my children. And I think about how I don't know them, and how they don't know me. And I get very sad. And sometimes I think that I want to go back, and clean up, and not be totally screwed up. But I can't. It's too far away. There's no way to get there from here. So I just smile, and beg, and drink. And smile, and beg, and drink. I guess that's all I can do, wouldn't you say?

Don, alias "Red," who has been homeless for twelve of his thirty-two years, describes his situation:

You know, I'm pretty well known around here. Everybody knows Red. They also know I'm the best. I can beat anyone in getting the change I need to keep me going. But when someone like you keeps asking me why I do this, and just keeps asking and asking — well, it finally got me to thinking. I do it 'cause there's nothing else I can do. Now who's going to hire a thirty-two-year-old alcoholic?

I used to try and work, but even the labor pools didn't want to deal with me. So here I am, begging — can you beat that? Begging for money to buy a bottle of wine so I can forget all the shit that I have to put up with every day. You know, I saw this sign in the window the other day. It said something like "When Life Gives You Lemons, Make Lemonade." I think that pretty much describes me. I'm making lemonade. But don't ask me to drink it. That stuff'll kill you!

To the general public, panhandlers are often characterized as abusers, intent on making a livelihood off the hard-working citizen. This often leads to resentment which, when coupled with an increase in panhandling, has caused many cities to pass ordinances developed to criminalize, or further criminalize, the activities of those who participate in this activity. A much more positive and less costly alternative would be to develop the services and programs needed to aid such individuals. First, there need to be more detox and longer-term substance-abuse programs for the homeless alcoholic and substance abuser, as well as follow-up case management ser-

vices, help with securing entitlements, job training or employment, appropriate alcohol- or drug-free housing, and medical assistance when necessary.<sup>18</sup>

Whatever services are developed should also build on the skills the homeless person brings with him — in the case of the panhandler, an entrepreneurial spirit coupled with energy, perception, and innovation. The development of such programs would be, in the long run, more effective in keeping panhandlers off the streets than the current practice of incarceration, with its revolving-door recidivism. Such programs would also be far less costly than incarceration in an already crowded prison system. The result would be financial and social savings to our cities and, perhaps most important, a lifeline to those homeless people who are currently trying to turn lemons into lemonade. ❧

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## Notes

1. National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, *Go Directly to Jail: A Report Analyzing Anti-Homeless Ordinances* (Washington: National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, December 1991).
2. This article concentrates on active begging, or panhandling, rather than on more passive mendicancy. An example of the latter is the practice that is becoming prevalent in many cities of holding up signs that advertise the bearer "will work for food." This activity, which is generally passive in nature, does not appear to cause the concern by local citizens that active panhandling does, nor does begging from one's homeless peers provoke much public concern.
3. Data on panhandling may vary according to the population from which they were gathered (soup line users, service agency clients, or residents in shelters, SROs, or on the streets). Data may also vary depending on how questions regarding mendicancy are phrased (Do you ever beg/panhandle/ask for money from strangers?). Regardless of these variables, available information shows that between 6.8 percent and 24 percent of selected homeless populations admit to practicing some form of mendicancy.
4. Greg Owen and June Heineman, *Results of the Twin City Survey of Emergency Shelter Residents* (St. Paul, Minn.: Wilder Research Center, 1989, 1990), 104 (1989); 109 (1990). Emergency shelter residents were asked, "Did you receive income by asking for money on the street last month?"
5. Martha R. Burt and Barbara E. Cohen, "Sociodemographic Profile of the Service-Using Homeless: Findings from a National Survey," in *Homeless in the United States: Data and Issues*, edited by Jamshid Momeni (New York: Praeger, 1990), 23.
6. Martha R. Burt and Barbara E. Cohen, *America's Homeless: Numbers, Characteristics, and Programs That Serve Them*, Urban Institute Report 89-3 (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, July 1989), 43.
7. Merv Goldstein, Stephen Levine, and Robert Lipkins, *Characteristics of Shelter Users* (New York: Adult Services Agency, Bureau of Management Information Systems, Human Resources Administration, City of New York, April 8, 1986), 17.
8. Kathleen H. Dockett, *Street Homeless People in the District of Columbia: Characteristics and Service Needs* (Washington, D.C.: University of the District of Columbia, 1989), 36.

9. Peter H. Rossi, Gene A. Fisher, and Georgianna Willis, *The Condition of the Homeless of Chicago* (Amherst, Mass.: Social and Demographic Research Institute, University of Chicago, September 1986), 88.
10. Roger K. Farr, Paul Koegel, and Audrey Burnam, *A Study of Mental Illness in the Skid Row Area of Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Department of Mental Health, March 1986), 205.
11. David A. Snow and Leon Anderson, "Identity Work among the Homeless: The Verbal Construction and Avowal of Personal Identities," *American Journal of Sociology* 92, no. 6 (May 1987): 1348.
12. Snow and Anderson have discussed role distancing and embracement in relationship to homelessness in general.
13. "Law Prohibiting Panhandling Repealed in Cincinnati," *Safety Network* 11, no. 1 (January 1992): 4.
14. "Free Speech Protections for Charitable Fund Raising Don't Cover Panhandlers, a U.S. Appeals Court Rules," *Chronicle of Philanthropy* 3 (May 29, 1990): 27-28.
15. Barbara Lubran, "Alcohol-Related Problems Among the Homeless," *Alcohol Health and Research World* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1987): 4.
16. Snow and Anderson, "Identity Work among the Homeless," 1364.
17. *Ibid.*, 1365.
18. Louisa R. Stark, "A Century of Alcohol and Homelessness: Demographics and Stereotypes," *Alcohol Health and Research World* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1987): 13.