

Give and take—credentials could aid panhandling

July 11 2017, by Brendan O'flaherty And Gwendolyn Dordick



People have always asked for alms, including the men depicted in this 17th-century European etching. Credit: Wenceslaus Hollar/The Metropolitan Museum of Art

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio recently said on a radio show that he would like to ban panhandling but wouldn't try because the [courts wouldn't allow it](#). Many panhandlers "are not particularly in need and just are finding a way to get some easy money and that does frustrate me," he said.

We – a sociologist and an economist based in New York City – have studied panhandling in downtown Manhattan for several years. We think that de Blasio and other leaders who want to root out panhandling can use smarter ways to quell local fears of being scammed while ensuring that the poor are able to solicit alms.

We have looked at where panhandlers work and how their numbers change over time. We have also talked to many panhandlers at length. This kind of scholarship is rare, so policymakers in the Big Apple and in other communities may want to check out our findings.

Legal trouble

As the proportion of major American cities banning panhandling shot up to 27 percent from 19 percent [between 2006 and 2016](#), opponents increasingly sued to overturn these restrictions.

A series of court rulings affirming the constitutional right to panhandle in places like [Tampa, Florida](#) and [Frankfort, Kentucky](#) bode badly for these bans.

But curbside solicitations should – at least theoretically – command broad enough support to not require a judicial assist. Egalitarians want to transfer wealth from the rich to the poor. Libertarians prefer voluntary transactions that circumvent bureaucracy. Religions of all kinds tell believers to give alms.

When more people give

One aspect of panhandling we have researched is how it responds to the flow of donations. Do more [people](#) do it, in other words, when the number of passersby grows?

Not really, it appears.

To figure this out, we monitored the rate of panhandling in downtown Manhattan – a square mile that includes Wall Street, Ground Zero and the surrounding areas – from 2014 to 2015. During this period, One World Trade Center opened near the former site of the twin towers, much of Ground Zero was restored and [tourism surged](#). But the number of panhandlers increased very little.

Even when we saw sidewalk traffic spike, we saw only a [modest uptick](#) in the total number of hours people spent panhandling. That suggests that giving to panhandlers does not tend to increase the frequency of solicitations.

We also counted the number of people who panhandle at a time in downtown Manhattan. Teaming up with some of our students, we found an average of eight to 10 panhandlers actively asking for donations at any given time during peak summer hours. Despite de Blasio's concerns, that's not a lot, considering that this small area generates as much economic activity as the [state of Wyoming](#) and includes some of the world's [richest pedestrians](#).

Given that it's hard to think of a better place to panhandle, we were surprised to find so few people doing it. One reason why these numbers may seem low is that they don't include the majority of homeless people we found because they weren't panhandling.

Problems and regulation

Most governments that crack down on panhandling do it out of concern that it will bother passersby who don't want to give. We studied this problem to see what could be done.

The math is pretty simple: The greater the ratio of pedestrians who want to give to pedestrians who don't, the smaller this problem is.

That gave rise to our core idea about what it takes to regulate panhandling intelligently. That is: Encourage what we call "successful panhandling," which brings together willing donors and willing solicitors; and discourage "unsuccessful panhandling," which targets people who don't even want to see solicitations, let alone give money to someone asking for help on the sidewalk.

What's wrong with most anti-panhandling ordinances is that they try to ban or discourage both kinds instead of promoting the former and discouraging the latter.

Panhandling credentials

The policies we think will work best would spread information about panhandlers, particularly through the issuance of credentials. The basic problem now is that potential donors know very little if anything about the panhandlers they encounter. That makes them reluctant to give.

Case in point: Almost any time we talked to a colleague or friend about our panhandling research, the first topic that came up was scams – they either declared that all panhandlers were scam artists or asked us what we had learned about how many were scam artists. But none of the panhandlers we encountered were faking their poverty. And contrary to what de Blasio said, they were putting in long hours and weren't raking in "easy money."

People in some professions – [personal trainers](#) and [acupuncturists](#), for instance – have solved similar problems by establishing credentials. As we proposed in a [recent paper](#), we believe the same approach might reduce concerns about panhandling, in turn reducing efforts to restrict or

ban the practice.

How might this work?

Nonprofits that aid low-income people, churches, [business-improvement districts](#) and other groups could issue (and rescind) panhandling credentials. Authorized panhandlers could wear a special button, hat or other item to convey their status.

These worn items would include ID numbers that potential donors could verify, and a system could be established to report counterfeits. These ID numbers might also make way for [cashless panhandling](#), [as Sweden now allows](#), and they might also assist in reporting and discouraging "[aggressive panhandling](#)."

We'd welcome credentialing experiments in Manhattan and elsewhere in the U.S. People who want to give donations and people who need to ask for them deserve a better chance of finding each other.

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