

Preventing Panhandling

This guide is one in a series of crime prevention publications designed to equip current and potential Safe City partners with low-cost tools to assess their crime problems and to develop strategies to address them. Other guides in this series include vandalism, car crimes, public disorder, retail burglary, and shoplifting.



Safe City is a model community-based initiative that aims to reduce crime, build awareness, and develop communities into safer places to live, work, and shop. Community partners in cities across the U.S. modify the model to best suit their needs and resources. The goal is to leverage existing resources by building collaborative relationships between law enforcement, businesses, residents, government leaders, property managers, and community organizations. This approach maximizes the tactical, financial, technological, and human resources available to address a community's crime problems. The Safe City model promotes partnerships and technical solutions as instrumental building blocks for success. These partnerships are further strengthened by individual retailers taking ownership over the crime and disorder problems occurring in and around their businesses.

Safe City has partnered with the Urban Institute, a non-profit policy research firm, to develop a variety of crime prevention strategies for use in retail settings, many of which are inexpensive and easy to implement. For more information about the Safe City program, please visit www.mysafecity.com. For more information about the Urban Institute's justice policy research activities, please visit www.urban.org/justice.

Understanding Panhandling

Panhandling is synonymous with begging and typically involves individuals soliciting for cash. However, panhandlers may also solicit donations in exchange for nominal labor, such as cleaning windshields, saving parking spaces, guarding parked cars, or helping to carry groceries. While panhandlers are typically passive, some may become aggressive by soliciting in a coercive or threatening manner. Panhandling is often viewed as an indication of social deterioration that can lead to more serious crime.

Panhandling Patterns

PANHANDLERS. Panhandlers are typically unmarried, unemployed men with few family ties. Although often associated with homeless populations, panhandlers may not be homeless. Likewise, panhandlers are not necessarily mentally ill. While many panhandlers have criminal records, they are also likely to have been victimized themselves. People who engage in panhandling commonly use the money for alcohol, drugs, and food.

PANHANDLING TARGETS. Panhandlers target individuals perceived to be sympathetic or generous, such as male-female couples, conventioners or tourists, college students, women, and grocery shoppers.

LOCATION. Panhandlers strategically position themselves in areas where soliciting yields high returns, such as areas of high pedestrian or vehicular traffic. Common panhandling locations include: ATMs; pay phones; subway, bus, or train stations; freeway entrances or

exits; grocery or convenience stores; and crowded sidewalks. Other environments that attract panhandlers include areas that provide seating, easy access to restrooms or water, and unsecured trash bins. Transient panhandlers also migrate to areas where the climate is warmer during the winter months.

TIME. Panhandling is more prevalent in moderate climates and/or during warmer weather months. It often increases during periods of economic decline, when government benefit programs decrease, or during periods of high drug-abuse levels, such as the crack epidemic.

Addressing Panhandling

Panhandling is legal in many jurisdictions. However, even where it is not legal, police typically tolerate or give a low priority to passive panhandling activity. Police are more likely to intervene in cases of aggressive panhandling or when excessive panhandling causes apprehension among the public. Even then, arrests are rare and typically result in the panhandler missing a court date or failing to pay a fine, which ultimately may result in a few days in jail. Enforcing laws against panhandling plays a relatively small role in controlling the problem. Public education to discourage donations, and providing adequate access and availability of social services — especially treatment for drug or alcohol abuse — are more effective tactics in a comprehensive community response to panhandling.

Using this Guide

This guide is designed to help you and your partners understand and address the panhandling problem affecting your business area and to help promote dialogue among retailers, police, and community stakeholders about these issues. Keep in mind that when implementing these strategies you should tailor your solution to the unique nature of your crime problem and business environment.

Other guides in this series address vandalism, retail burglary, public disorder, car crimes, and shoplifting.

Quick Tips

Here are a few guiding steps that can help prevent panhandling:

- 1 Measure your panhandling problem.
- 2 Identify business practices that may make you vulnerable to panhandling.
- 3 Choose a practical strategy to reduce panhandling and try it.
- 4 Measure your panhandling problem again to assess the impact of your strategy.
- 5 Modify your strategy if necessary.

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URBAN INSTITUTE
Justice Policy Center



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Defining Your Problem

Before implementing a strategy to prevent panhandling, it is important to define the nature of the particular panhandling problem for your area. Although there are many methods you may use to address panhandling on your own, a community-wide response that incorporates other area businesses, agencies, and public services is beneficial to address any underlying community problems which may be related to panhandling. Community partners should consider the questions that appear below. Answers to these questions will help you understand the problem affecting your business area so that you can select an appropriate response strategy.

Questions to Ask:	Example Responses:
Are customers reluctant to patronize your business because of panhandlers?	Sometimes. On occasion customers have complained to management about the panhandlers.
Are other area businesses having problems similar to yours?	Yes, businesses located along the same block have the same issues.
What are panhandlers doing to solicit donations?	Most panhandlers will ask a passerby for change.
Is panhandling particularly pronounced during certain times of day, day of week, month, or season?	There are more panhandlers on the weekends, when it is the busiest. There is more activity in nicer weather months.
Are there specific locations that pose continuous problems?	They mostly loiter on the sidewalk in front of the building near the ATM.
Are the panhandlers transient or "regulars"?	I typically see the same 3 or 4 people panhandling.
What are the specific reasons an individual is panhandling? Are they ill or unemployed, or are they "professionals"?	We asked the regular panhandlers and they said they often make more money panhandling than working a minimum wage job.
Does your city or town have a law or ordinance prohibiting panhandling activity?	We checked with our city attorney and there is no city ordinance related to panhandling.
How do the police respond to reports of panhandling?	I have called the police on occasion but they cannot take enforcement action unless the panhandlers are being aggressive.
What social services or agencies in your community can you recommend to panhandlers in need of support?	I requested a list of social service providers from city hall and learned about food/shelter providers as well as employment services.

Developing Response Strategies

After you've worked with your partners to define the panhandling problem for your area, you are ready to develop a response strategy to prevent it. The following are strategies that can be used for common panhandling scenarios. Do not forget that situations vary and that yours may require a tailored response. In addition, be prepared for potential implementation challenges, such as unanticipated costs and delays in both the implementation and impact of your crime prevention strategy.

It is important to measure your panhandling problem before and after initiated a response. Doing so will tell you whether the response you selected is effective. Proof of effectively reducing panhandling (or any other crime) can be useful in persuading other area businesses to join collaborative efforts to reduce crime throughout the community.

Your measurement may also provide evidence that the strategy is not reducing panhandling as you expected, suggesting an adjustment to the response is in order. While you may note improvements immediately, it is advisable to wait at least a few months after implementing a response to see whether it has had an impact. The following table outlines ways that you can measure the state of your panhandling problem, outcomes that will indicate whether the panhandling problem has improved, and possible data sources.

When measuring outcomes it is important to note that a temporary increase in reporting of incidents to police may represent a positive outcome, indicating that community members are paying greater attention to panhandling. However, reported incidents should decline over time as the number of panhandlers decrease.

Measurement	Data Source	Strategic Response	Outcome
"Regular" panhandlers			
- Number of known panhandlers - Number of complaints - Number of calls for service - Level of concern about panhandling - Number of customers avoiding business - Volume of litter and number of public urination incidents	- Local police - Business records - Survey of customers - Personal observations	- Discourage patrons from giving to panhandlers by handing out educational brochures or posting educational signs - Require panhandlers to obtain solicitation permits through a city ordinance or law - Prohibit panhandling in specific locations (such as within 50 feet of ATMs or in particularly popular panhandling areas) through a city ordinance or law - Modify environment to discourage loitering or panhandling, for example remove benches or trees, install "no loitering" signs - Provide informational brochures about available social services to panhandlers	- Fewer known panhandlers - Fewer complaints - Fewer calls for service - Less concern about panhandling - Fewer customers avoiding business - Reduced litter and signs of disorder in panhandling locations
Individuals offering nominal services			
- Number of complaints - Number of calls for service - Number of known offenders - Level of concern about offenders - Type of serious offenses related to services - Number of customers avoiding business	- Local police - Business records - Survey of customers - Personal observations	- Control access to windshield washing materials, such as water or areas to store buckets - Require all "vendors" to have permits - Initiate civilian patrols to monitor and discourage activity - Prohibit interference with vehicles or pedestrians through city ordinance or law - Prohibit activity in specific locations, such as within 20 feet of intersections through city ordinance or law, or in specific commercial parking lots through private property owner regulations	- Fewer complaints - Fewer calls for service - Fewer known offenders - Less concern about offenders - Less serious offenses - Increased number of customers - Fewer customers avoiding business
Chronically intoxicated individuals			
- Number of complaints - Number of calls for service - Number of intoxicated individuals in public - Level of concern about individuals - Volume of litter and number of public urination incidents	- Local police - Business records - Survey of customers - Personal observations	- Prohibit alcohol sales of single serving containers of beer or wine through city ordinance or law - Initiate civilian patrols to monitor and discourage activity - Modify environment to discourage loitering or panhandling, such as removing benches or trees - Provide informational brochures about available social services and substance abuse treatment to panhandlers with suspected alcohol or drug addiction problems	- Fewer complaints - Fewer calls for service - Fewer intoxicated individuals - Less concern about individuals - Reduced litter and signs of disorder

Measuring Your Problem: An Example

The Dalton Main Street Initiative (DMSI)

originated to address increasing concerns of problems along Dalton's one-mile stretch of Main Street's commercial corridor. DMSI is comprised of a few dozen retail establishments and small community agencies located along Main Street. DMSI members have a variety of concerns and decided to begin by soliciting the opinions of Dalton's citizens with a survey. The survey included several questions about each of the group's concerns, including panhandling, vandalism, and disorderly youth. A portion of the panhandling survey questions is provided here (see chart).

While surveying customers of each business and agency, DMSI also mailed the survey to 500 randomly selected Dalton residents who lived in close proximity to Main Street. After collecting survey information, DMSI tabulated the survey results to guide their planning process. By far, the greatest concern among survey respondents was panhandling. Given this information, DMSI was better prepared to address a problem that likely has a great impact on business along Main Street.

DMSI implemented the following changes to address panhandlers: dissuade Main Street patrons from donating cash through poster and brochure campaign; post "no panhandling" signs at each business; and establish a civilian patrol to monitor panhandling activity. The group also petitioned the town council to strengthen alcohol regulations and pass a resolution prohibiting panhandlers from specific areas. In addition, a subcommittee was formed to speak with the panhandlers about why they solicit for money and what kind of help they need. The subcommittee also gathered information about all social service providers and agencies that could provide support services for panhandlers and shared the information with the panhandlers and the full DMSI.

DMSI decided that after six months of addressing panhandlers, they would re-survey the community and determine if there have been any improvements in shoppers' and citizens' perceptions of panhandling.

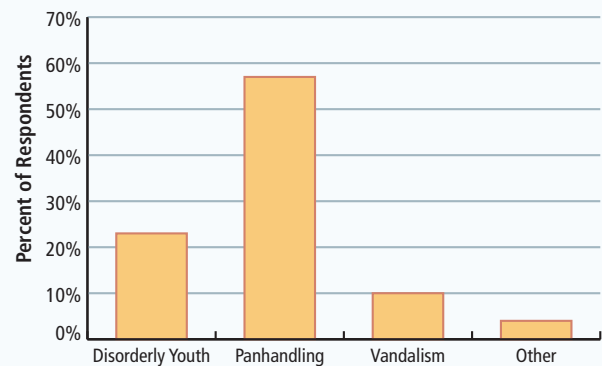
How concerned are you about each of the following crimes:

	Very	Somewhat	Not at all
Disorderly Youth			
Panhandling			
Vandalism			
Other			

During the past 6 months, how has the frequency of each crime changed?

	Increased	Decreased	Same
Disorderly Youth			
Panhandling			
Vandalism			
Other			

Greatest Concern Among DMSI Survey Respondents



How Other Communities Prevent Panhandling

Here are examples of how other retail establishments addressed panhandling in their communities.

Downtown Business District Evanston, Illinois

The downtown business district of Evanston experienced a significant increase in aggressive panhandling that threatened the vitality of businesses. A panel of residents and representatives from business, law enforcement, education, and religious groups formed to study the problem and present strategies to prevent panhandling. The panel decided to focus on changing the behaviors of the givers and reducing the rewards (of money) to panhandlers. The group established a public education campaign to educate givers and dissuade donations, and selected individuals spoke directly with givers on the street to direct them to alternative methods of assistance. The police increased patrols throughout the business district. After several months, the number of panhandlers in the district dropped from 36 to 23, a 64 percent reduction; the panhandlers that remained were much less aggressive. In a survey of downtown business owners, 75 percent of respondents were satisfied with the strategies to reduce panhandling and felt the aggressive panhandling had declined (*Anti-Panhandling Strategy, Evanston, Illinois 1995*).

Intersection of 1st Avenue and Commercial Drive Vancouver, Canada

The City of Vancouver experienced aggressive panhandling and squeegee activity near a downtown intersection. The neighborhood policing center, a partnership with business owners, Vancouver police, and residents, initiated several projects to address the problem. Police increased patrol and enforcement activities and developed a list of repeat offenders. The partnership removed a bench used primarily by intoxicated people, as well as newspaper boxes, which people used to hide bottles or squeegee materials. Two banks at the intersection eliminated alcoves and ledges, which provided shelter and hiding spaces for unwanted individuals. In addition, the partnership redesigned landscaping and removed graffiti near the intersection. After three months of implementation, calls to police decreased by more than 50 percent compared to the previous year (*Intersecting Solutions 1999*).

State Street Business Corridor Madison, Wisconsin

State Street businesses and the Madison Police Department partnered to address aggressive panhandling. After studying the panhandlers and their habits along State Street, the partnership determined that changes to the panhandling ordinance were in order. The city ultimately passed an amendment and police officers educated the panhandlers about the new regulations and gave them warnings for violations. To clarify the ordinance even further, the partnership identified two locations to be legal sites for panhandling. These changes resulted in a decrease from 80 panhandlers along State Street to only two. State Street also experienced a 50 percent decrease in transports due to alcohol incapacitation (*State Street Spare Change: Solution for Rampant Menacing and Aggressive Panhandling 2006*).



Additional Resources

- Your Local Police Department
- Your Local Safe City Partnership
- Center for Problem-Oriented Policing: www.popcenter.org
- Public Safety Education Unit: www.pseu.info/publicdisorder.shtml
- PBS/Web Lab's NeedCom Market Research for Panhandlers: www.pbs.org/weblab/needcom/home2.html
- Memphis Center City Commission: www.downtownmemphis.com/domain/cleansafe/cleansafe_panhandling.asp
- Criminal Justice Legal Foundation Guide to Regulating Panhandling: www.cjlf.org/publctns/Panhandling/PIII.htm
- National Crime Prevention Council: <http://www.ncpc.org>
- Small Business Administration: www.sba.gov
- National Retail Federation: <http://www.nrf.com>
- National Restaurant Association: www.restaurant.org
- National Association of Convenience Stores: <http://www.nacsonline.com/NACS/default.htm>

Sources consulted for this guide include:

Anti-Panhandling Strategy. 1995. Evanston, Illinois: www.popcenter.org/library/goldstein/1995/95-22.PDF

Intersecting Solutions. 1999. Vancouver Police Department, Canada: [www.popcenter.org/library/goldstein/1999/99-70\(F\).pdf](http://www.popcenter.org/library/goldstein/1999/99-70(F).pdf)

Scott, Michael C. 2002. Panhandling. Problem-Oriented Guides for Police Series, No. 13. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Available: <http://www.popcenter.org/Problems/problem-panhandling.htm>.

State Street Spare Change: Solution for Rampant Menacing and Aggressive Panhandling. 2006. Madison, Wisconsin: www.popcenter.org/library/goldstein/2006/06-31.pdf



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