PREVENTING AND ENDING HOMELESSNESS

Fairfax County Panhandling Study

Survey and Interview Findings

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RESEARCH REPORT

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We thank all the people who spoke with us about their experiences with panhandling. Without those conversations, this study would not have been possible. We also thank Thomas Barnett from the Fairfax County Department of Housing and Community Development for his review and comments on a draft of this report. Finally, we thank Timothy Triplett at the Urban Institute for his expertise in applying survey methods to this study and Samantha Batko at the Urban Institute for her comments and guidance during the development of this report.

Executive Summary

Panhandling refers to soliciting money or food for personal use without offering goods or services in return. Following the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors approval of a survey to better understand the needs and experiences of people who panhandle in the county, the Fairfax County Department of Housing and Community Development engaged researchers at the Urban Institute to conduct this study. Between July and November 2025, Urban Institute researchers conducted 40 field surveys and six semistructured interviews with individuals who panhandle in Fairfax County. This summary report presents findings from the surveys, complemented by insights from interviews. We summarize the characteristics, experiences, and preferences of respondents and offer recommendations for future service delivery.

Fairfax County Panhandling Study

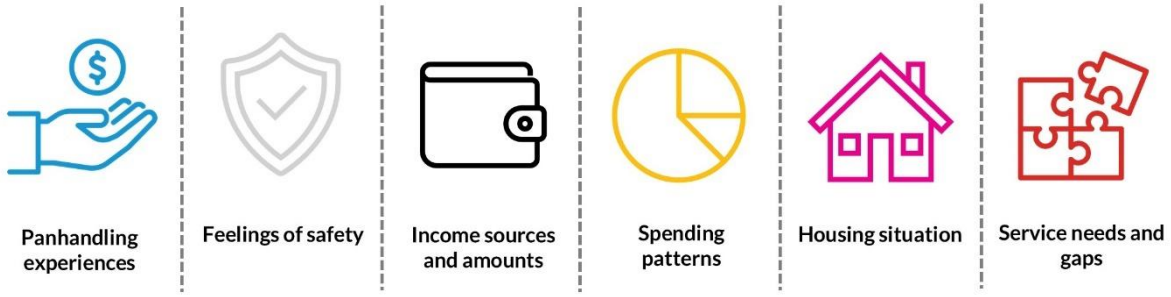
Beginning in February 2025, researchers at the Urban Institute conducted an exploratory study on the needs and experiences of people who panhandle in Fairfax County. Drawing on field surveys and in-depth interviews, the study aimed to:

1. describe the characteristics and experiences of a sample of individuals who panhandle;
2. identify the resources and services that people who panhandle want and need; and
3. make recommendations to support the well-being of people who panhandle.

Between July and November 2025, the research team conducted 40 field surveys and 6 semistructured interviews with individuals who panhandle in Fairfax County. Surveys covered six key domains (figure ES.1), and the follow-up interviews expanded on these areas while also exploring additional topics related to health and well-being and perceptions of panhandling.

FIGURE ES.1

Fairfax County Panhandling Survey Domains



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Source: Urban Institute survey on panhandling in Fairfax County (Appendix B).

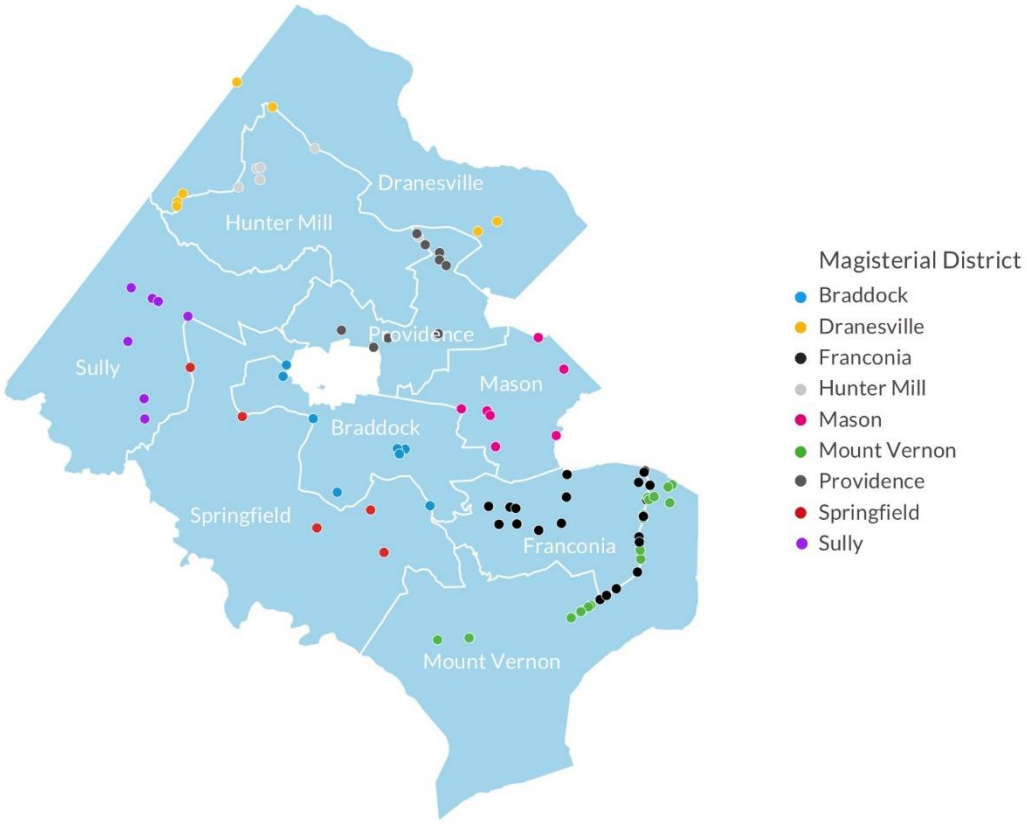
Because of the size and scope of the study and limited population-level data, the findings are (1) strictly descriptive, (2) do not support statistical inference, and (3) should not be considered representative of all individuals who panhandle in Fairfax County. This study was funded by the Fairfax County Department of Housing and Community Development.

Surveying

Fairfax County is divided into nine magisterial districts: Braddock, Dranesville, Franconia, Hunter Mill, Mason, Mount Vernon, Providence, Springfield, and Sully. To identify survey canvassing areas, the research team prioritized panhandling "hot spots" previously identified by the Fairfax County Police Department and reports from county constituents. Figure ES.2 maps these locations by magisterial district. Most panhandling "hot spots" were identified in Mount Vernon, Franconia, and Providence.

FIGURE ES.2

Fairfax County Panhandling "Hot Spots"



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Source: Urban Institute review of secondary materials.
Notes: As shown in the map, some hot spot locations may fall on district border lines; for the purposes of the mapping tool, a location is categorized in one or the other.

Between July 25, 2025, and September 12, 2025, the research team approached 53 individuals, 40 of whom completed the survey. Among the 13 individuals who did not complete the survey, three were deemed ineligible (i.e., did not speak English or Spanish, were not at least 18 years old, or were not actively panhandling at the time of the survey). The remaining individuals declined consent, stating they were not interested or felt the survey would take too much time and interfere with panhandling activities.

Survey and Interview Findings

The following are key findings, which are examined in greater depth in the full report.

- **Safety and Daily Experiences**
  - » Most respondents reported feeling safe in their daily lives and while panhandling.
- **Duration and Patterns of Panhandling**
  - » Many respondents had been panhandling for a year or longer.
  - » Panhandling typically occurred during periods of high necessity, such as covering rent or living essentials.
- **Economic Drivers and Income Sources**
  - » Limited or no employment income was the most common reason for panhandling.
  - » Most respondents reported annual incomes of under $10,000.
  - » Panhandling was the primary source of income for most respondents.
  - » Half earned less than $51 per day from panhandling, while one-third earned between $51 and $100, with wide variation across respondents.
  - » Panhandling income was primarily used for food, temporary shelter or housing, clothing, and hygiene needs.
- **Housing Instability and Living Conditions**
  - » Unsheltered homelessness was the most common housing situation.
  - » Most respondents had been living in their housing situation, including homelessness, for at least a year.
- **Health and Service Needs**
  - » Many respondents reported managing a chronic health condition or living with a disability.
  - » Most had used food assistance and medical or mental health services in the past six months.
  - » Nearly half (4 in 9) reported needing permanent housing assistance but had not been able to access it because of low awareness of services.
  - » More than one-third of survey respondents expressed interest in receiving outreach, and many shared that the survey team was the first to engage them about their well-being and housing situation.

- **Perceptions of Panhandling**
  - » Interviews revealed that people who panhandle in Fairfax County face persistent public misconceptions and significant daily hardships. Participants emphasized that panhandling is often misunderstood as a choice, even though most interviewees had worked for the majority of their lives and turned to panhandling only after sudden life changes such as injuries, health problems, or job loss.
  - » Interviewees also described living in precarious conditions—sleeping in shared cars, eating infrequently, and managing serious health issues without reliable care or support. Many relied on food banks, SNAP benefits, emergency services, and informal help from others who panhandle. Their reflections underscored that for many, panhandling is a means of basic survival amid limited resources and few alternatives.

Recommendations

Findings from the field surveys and interviews reveal critical gaps in access to shelter, housing, health care, employment, and information about available services. Although Fairfax County offers a comprehensive set of supports and services, many individuals who panhandle are unaware of these resources or face barriers such as language, limited technology access, and transportation barriers. Participants emphasized the need for clear, accessible information and more proactive, in-person outreach. The following recommendations are intended to address these gaps:

- **Expand street outreach**, particularly in-person engagement, to connect individuals with housing, health care, and employment resources.
- **Improve language access**, especially for Spanish-speakers, through bilingual staff, in-language materials, and outreach delivered face-to-face.
- **Increase awareness of housing programs**, as many respondents experiencing homelessness or unstable housing were unaware of available supports.
- **Enhance access to affordable health care**, including clearer multilingual information about low-cost providers, Medicaid, and specialty care.
- **Strengthen employment and benefit supports** by improving communication about available job resources and providing assistance navigating employment services and accessing benefits such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI).

- **Build broader service networks** by partnering with local businesses, faith-based organizations, and community groups to better reach people who panhandle.

Conclusion

The sample of people surveyed and interviewed who panhandle in Fairfax County face substantial economic hardship, homelessness, housing instability, and barriers to employment. Their experiences also reflect challenges related to health, safety, and social stigma. Respondents expressed a strong need for housing assistance, employment opportunities, and access to basic needs and supportive services. Strengthening these resources can help address the underlying drivers of panhandling, promote stability, and improve overall well-being.

Fairfax County Panhandling Study

In September 2023, the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors approved a survey to better understand panhandling in the county. Panhandling refers to soliciting money or food for personal use without offering goods or services in return, and was identified as a persistent concern in the county in 2023.[1] This report summarizes the characteristics, experiences, and preferences of the survey sample from an Urban Institute study of panhandling in Fairfax County conducted between July and November 2025; it also offers recommendations for future service delivery.

Background

In February 2025, the Fairfax County Department of Housing and Community Development, at the direction of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, engaged researchers at the Urban Institute to conduct an exploratory study on the needs and experiences of individuals who panhandle. The study draws on field surveys and semistructured, in-depth interviews with individuals who engage in panhandling to address two key research questions:

1. What are the demographics and experiences of a sample of people who panhandle in Fairfax County?
2. What resources or services do people who panhandle want and need, and how might these services influence panhandling patterns?

This summary report presents findings from the field surveys and insights shared during participant interviews. Box 1 summarizes the existing research on panhandling.

BOX 1

Insights on Panhandling from Existing Research

- **Panhandling in urban areas:** Research shows that panhandling is most common in high-traffic urban areas, where individuals often shift locations to follow tourist and commuter flows.[a] Studies indicate that 82 percent of people who panhandle live in central cities, compared with 69 percent of non-panhandlers, and that rates in urban settings are nearly twice those in suburban areas.[b]

- **Panhandling and homelessness are not synonymous:** Despite its visibility, fewer than 10 percent of people experiencing homelessness engage in panhandling. Additionally, some individuals maintain precarious housing and use panhandling as supplemental income, contributing to its persistence in many communities.[c]

- **Poverty and employment as drivers of panhandling:** Research consistently shows that panhandling is largely driven by poverty and significant barriers to employment. Studies find that many people who panhandle lack access to government benefits and often rely on informal income sources to meet basic needs.[d] Survey data also indicate that most would prefer stable, minimum-wage employment but face obstacles such as disabilities, mental illness, limited work histories, or gaps in job skills.[e] Evidence further suggests that panhandling frequently follows major negative life events—such as job loss, illness, or family disruption—and that income from panhandling remains highly unstable, typically ranging from $280 to $400 per month, well below the poverty line.[g]

- **Responses to panhandling:** Although panhandling is protected under the First Amendment, many localities have attempted to regulate it by focusing on aggressive solicitation or limiting specific behaviors linked to panhandling. However, after the 2015 *Reed v. Town of Gilbert* ruling, any regulation that touches on the content of speech must meet strict scrutiny—a standard most laws cannot satisfy.[h] As a result, municipalities have increasingly turned to public awareness campaigns instead of restrictive ordinances,[i] encouraging residents to give to charities rather than directly to individuals, often framing this approach as offering "a hand up, not a handout."[j]

a Dordick, Gwendolyn, Brendan O'Flaherty, Jakob Brounstein, Srishti Sinha, and Jungsoo Yoo. 2018. "What Happens When You Give Money to Panhandlers? The Case of Downtown Manhattan." *Journal of Urban Economics* 108: 107–23.
b Lee, Barrett A., and Chad R. Farrell. 2003. "Buddy, Can You Spare a Dime?: Homelessness, Panhandling, and the Public." *Urban Affairs Review* 38 (3): 299–324.
c Lei, Lei. 2013. "Employment, Day Labor, and Shadow Work among Homeless Assistance Clients in the United States." *Journal of Poverty* 17 (3): 253–72.
d Leeson, Peter T. and R. August Hardy. 2022. "American Panhandling." *Cities* 124: 103601.
e Bose, Rohit, and Stephen H. Hwang. 2022. "Income and Spending Patterns among Panhandlers." *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 167 (5): 477–79.
f Reinhard, Daniel. 2021. "How Much Do They Make? A Systematic Review of Income Generated from Begging." *International Criminal Justice Review* 33 (1): 66–86.
h Reed v. Town of Gilbert, 576 U.S. 155 (2015)
i Neidig, Natie Pilgrim. 2017. "The Demise of Anti-Panhandling Laws in America." *St. Mary's Law Journal* 48 (3): 543–71.
j National Homelessness Law Center (NHLC). 2021. *Housing Not Handcuffs 2021: State Law Supplement*. Washington, DC: NHLC.

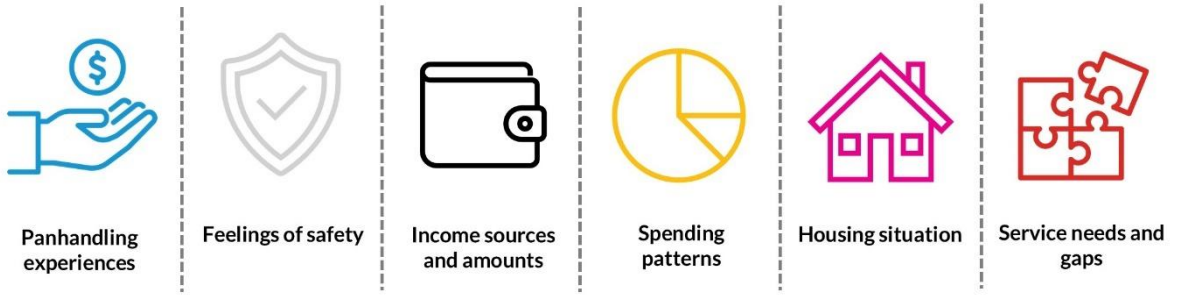
Methods

The primary data sources for this study were field surveys and in-depth qualitative interviews with people who panhandle in Fairfax County.

Urban researchers aimed to complete up to 40 surveys with individuals actively panhandling during the data collection period (July to September 2025). The survey took approximately 15–20 minutes and included up to 39 questions across six domains (figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Fairfax County Panhandling Survey Domains



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Source: Urban Institute survey on panhandling in Fairfax County (Appendix B).

To supplement and contextualize the survey findings, the research team also planned to conduct up to eight in-depth interviews (45–60 minutes each) with participants who expressed interest in sharing more about their experiences. These interviews expanded on the survey domains and explored additional topics related to health and well-being and perceptions of panhandling as well. Interviews were offered in English and Spanish and were conducted between October and November 2025.

In total, the research team conducted 40 field surveys and six semistructured interviews with individuals who panhandle in Fairfax County. Because only a small number of interviews were completed, the perspectives captured may not reflect those of all survey respondents or the broader panhandling population. Additionally, given the study's scope and the limited availability of population-level data, the findings presented in this report are (1) strictly descriptive, (2) do not support statistical inferences, and (3) should not be considered representative of all individuals who panhandle in Fairfax County.

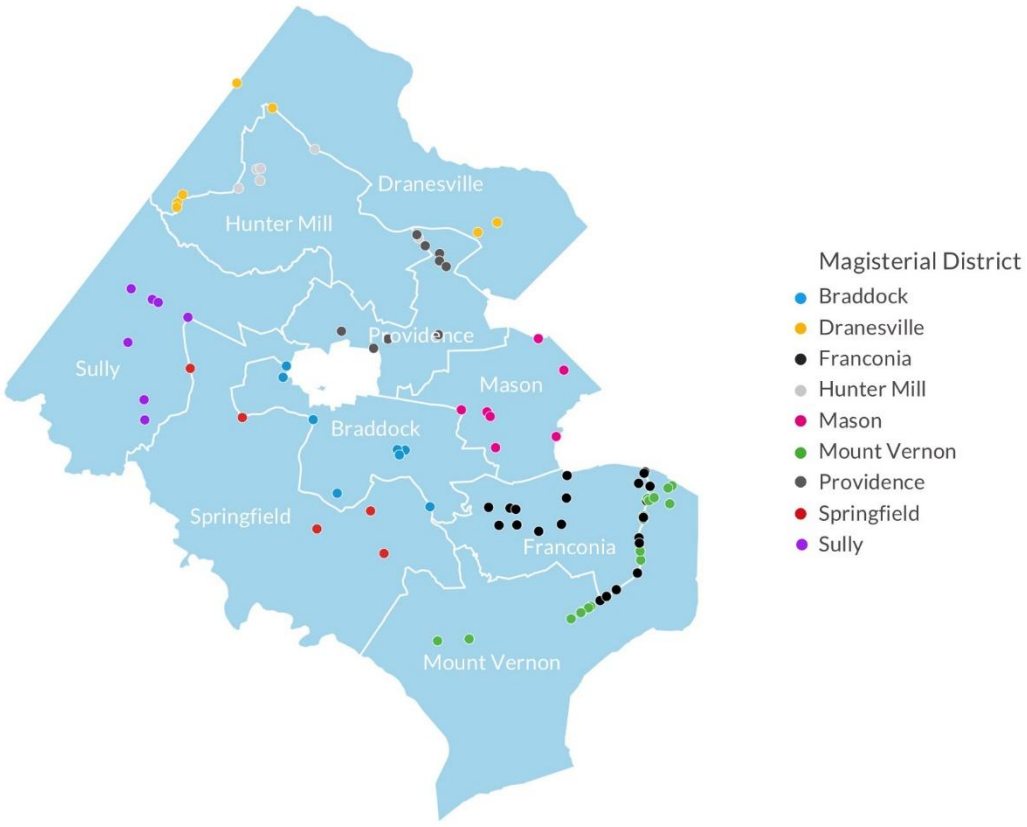
Additional details are provided in the appendices: data collection information in Appendix A, the complete survey tool in Appendix B, and the interview guide in Appendix C.

Survey Sampling

Fairfax County is divided into nine magisterial districts: Braddock, Dranesville, Franconia, Hunter Mill, Mason, Mount Vernon, Providence, Springfield, and Sully. To identify survey canvassing areas, the research team prioritized panhandling "hot spots" identified by the Fairfax County Police Department and reports from county constituents. Figure 2 maps these locations by magisterial district. Most panhandling "hot spots" (55 in total, or 58 percent) were identified in Mount Vernon, Franconia, and Providence.

FIGURE 2

Fairfax County Panhandling "Hot Spots"



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Source: Urban Institute review of secondary materials.
Notes: As shown in the map, some "hot spot" locations may fall on district border lines; and for the purposes of this mapping tool, a location is categorized in one or the other.

Survey Response Rate

Between July 25, 2025, and September 12, 2025, the research team approached 53 individuals, of whom 40 completed the survey (table 1). Among the 13 individuals who did not complete the survey, three were deemed ineligible (i.e., did not speak English or Spanish, were not at least 18 years old, or were not actively panhandling at the time of the survey). The remaining individuals declined consent, stating they were not interested or felt the survey would take too much time and interfere with panhandling. One person who declined noted dissatisfaction with county services and chose not to participate. Overall, the research team achieved a response rate of 75 percent for the surveys.[2]

TABLE 1

Fairfax County Panhandling "Hot Spots" and Canvassing Results by Magisterial District

		Survey Canvassing Results	
Magisterial District	**Preidentified "hot spots"**	**Refused/ineligible**	**Completed**
Mount Vernon	27	0	5
Franconia	18	5	5
Providence	10	1	4
Braddock	8	0	3
Hunter Mill	8	0	2
Sully	7	1	2
Mason	7	5	17
Dranesville	5	1	1
Springfield	5	0	1
Total	**95**	**13**	**40**

Source: Urban Institute review of secondary materials and Urban Institute survey on panhandling conducted between July and September 2025.
Notes: Panhandling "hot spots" included intersections identified by the Fairfax County Police Department and reports from Fairfax County constituents.

Although the research team surveyed at least one individual from each magisterial district, representation was notably skewed toward the Mason district, particularly compared with preidentified "hot spot" areas. The team made efforts to canvass on multiple days and at varying times; however, discrepancies between expected and actual representation may have been influenced by uncontrollable external factors, such as seasonal conditions (e.g., weather), and the political and economic context during the identification of "hot spots" versus the survey period. Consequently, and as previously emphasized, findings in this report are strictly descriptive and reflect the characteristics and experiences of those surveyed and not of the broader population of individuals who panhandle in Fairfax County.

Survey Respondent Characteristics

Of the 40 people who completed the survey, most identified their ethnicity or race as White (43 percent) or Black, African American, or African (33 percent). Fewer than 8 percent of respondents reported being of more than one ethnicity or race. A majority (78 percent) prefer to speak English, while 15 percent primarily speak Spanish and 5 percent prefer to speak another language. Most respondents reported being between the ages of 35 and 54 (60 percent), followed by older adults aged 55 and older (23 percent), and younger adults aged 18 to 34 (18 percent). Three-fourths of respondents identified as men and approximately 22 percent identified as women. Twelve and a half percent of respondents reported having served in the US military. See table 2 for a detailed breakdown of these selected respondent characteristics compared with the adult population living in poverty in Fairfax County.

TABLE 2

Demographic Characteristics: Survey Respondents Compared with Fairfax County Adults in Poverty

Individuals surveyed in Fairfax County between July 2025 and September 2025 compared with the Fairfax County adult population below the poverty level

	Total survey participants		Fairfax County adult population below the poverty level	
	n	**%**	***n***	**%**
Age				
18–34 years	7	18%	17,104	36%
35–54 years	24	60%	15,756	33%
55 years or older	9	23%	14,661	31%
Gender				
Woman	9	22%	27,498	58%
Man	30	75%	20,023	42%
Other	1	3%	-	-
Race and ethnicity				
White	17	43%	18,090	38%
Black, African American, or African	13	33%	6,272	13%
American Indian/Alaska Native or Indigenous	<5	10%	150	<1%
Hispanic/Latina/e/o	<5	10%	12,618	27%
Unknown/unreported	5	<1%	-	-
Veteran status				
Yes	5	13%	1,840	4%
No	35	87%	45,505	96%
Preferred language				
English	31	78%	19,323	41%
Spanish	6	15%	11,578	24%
Other language	2	1%	16,620	35%
Unknown/unreported	1	3%	-	-

	Total survey participants		Fairfax County adult population below the poverty level	
	n	%	*n*	%
Total	**40**		**47,521**	

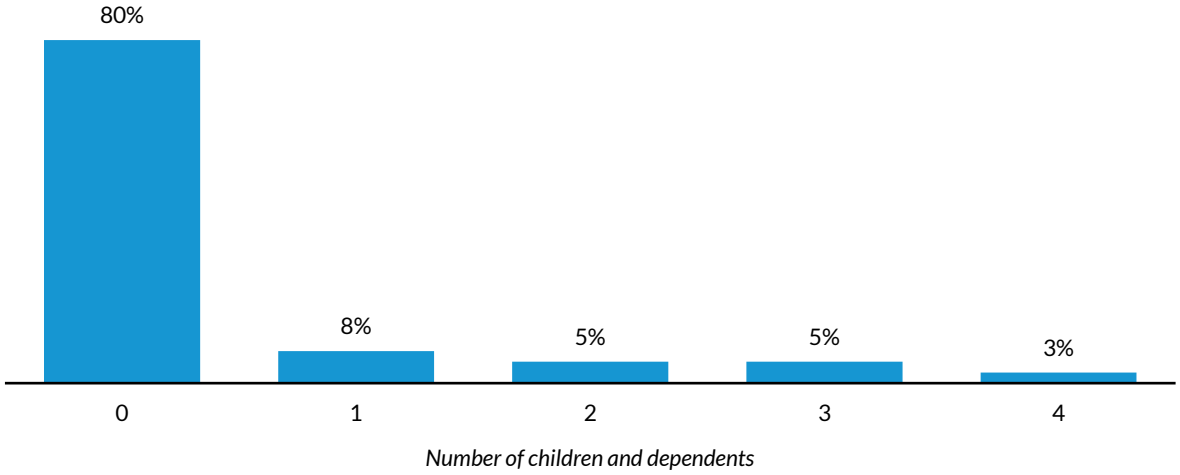
Sources: Urban Institute survey on panhandling conducted between July 2025 and September 2025. Responses to questions (33) What is your age?; (34) How do you identify your gender?; (35) Which of the following best describes your ethnicity or race?; (36) Have you ever served in the US Military (including the National Guard or Reserves)?; and (37) What language do you primarily speak with the people you live with?; US Census Bureau, US Department of Commerce, "Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months," American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables, Table S1701, accessed January 6, 2026, https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2023.S1701?q=Fairfax+County,+Virginia+poverty+by+race.
Notes: Three survey respondents selected more than one race and ethnicity category. Age categories have been collapsed to protect the privacy of respondents. For the purposes of this table, preferred language categories in the survey are compared with language spoken at home in the American Community Survey.

Additionally, 80 percent of respondents indicated they do not live with children or dependents under the age of 18, whereas 20 percent reported living with one to four dependents under 18 (figure 3).

FIGURE 3

Survey Respondents with Minor Children and Dependents

Percentage of respondents who reported living with dependents under age 18



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Source: Urban Institute survey on panhandling conducted between July and September 2025. Responses to survey question (39) How many children/dependents under 18 do you currently live with?
Notes: N=40.

Key Findings

Between July and November 2025, the research team conducted 40 field surveys and six semistructured interviews with individuals who panhandle in Fairfax County. The following section presents findings organized around the key areas of inquiry used to address the research questions.

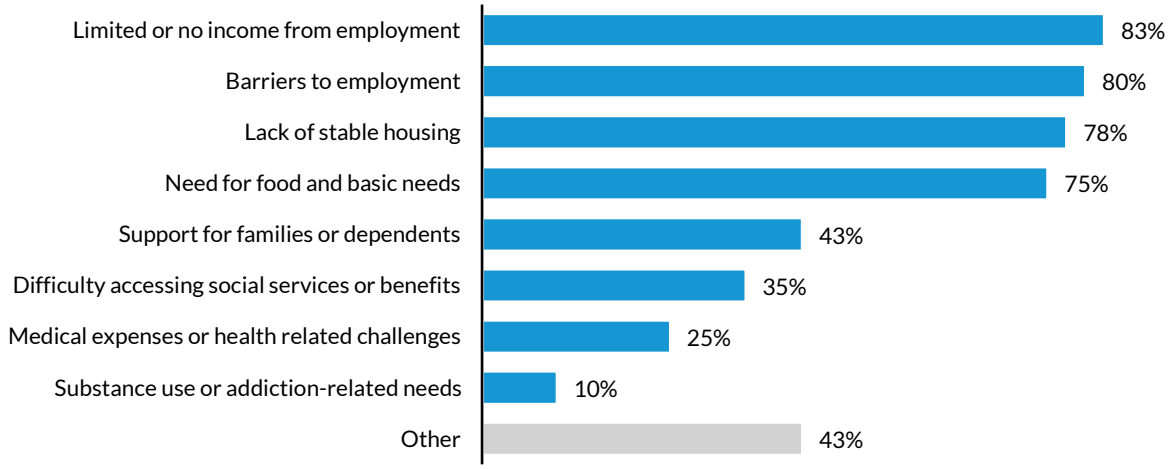
Panhandling Experiences

The survey explored the motivations behind panhandling, its role in daily life, and its significance as a source of income, to help researchers understand respondents' experiences with panhandling. When asked about reasons for panhandling, respondents rated various factors as a major reason, minor reason, or not a reason at all. Nearly 83 percent reported that limited or no income from employment was a major reason. Other frequently cited reasons included barriers to employment (80 percent), lack of stable housing (78 percent), and need for food and basic necessities (75 percent). Only 10 percent identified substance use or addiction-related needs as a major reason (see figure 4).

FIGURE 4

Major Reasons for Panhandling

Percentage of survey respondents who identified each as a "major reason" for panhandling



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Source: Urban Institute survey on panhandling conducted between July and September 2025. Survey responses to question (11) What are the main reasons that you panhandle?
Notes: N=40. Many of the responses in the "Other" category echoed the main themes, such as barriers to employment, lack of reliable transportation, lack of stable housing, medical expenses, supporting dependents, and saving money for the future.

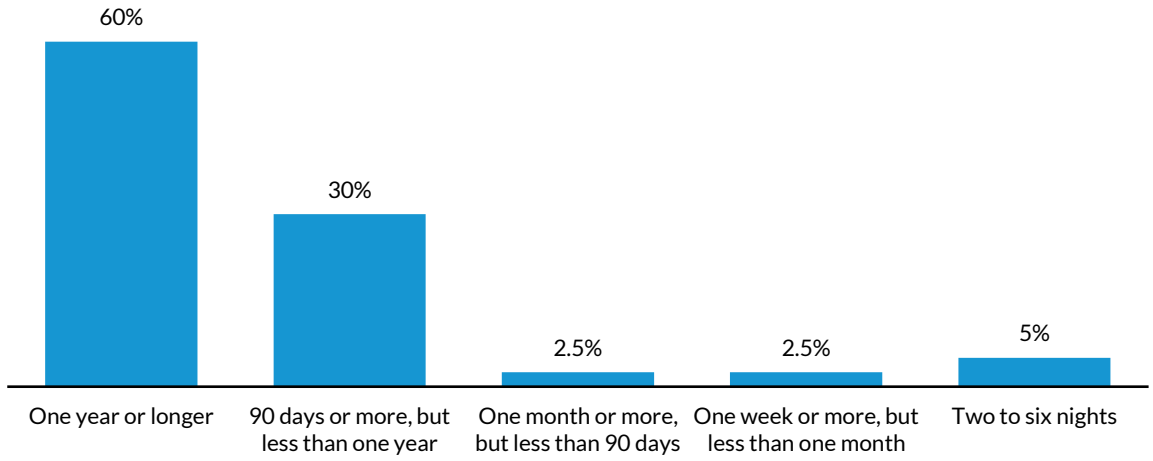
Interview participants consistently described their first experience with panhandling as a matter of necessity—often to pay for housing or buy a meal—typically following job loss and in the absence of support. Employment loss was frequently linked to disabling conditions, health problems, or aging, which made it difficult to continue previous work. The lack of support after losing work reflected gaps in the social safety net. One participant explained, "I needed the money and at the time I wasn't getting disability [benefits]." Now receiving disability benefits, this participant emphasized how access to social services significantly reduced their reliance on panhandling. Their experience, like those of others interviewed, highlights two key factors shaping panhandling: economic necessity and insufficient support systems during times of crisis.

Regarding the length of time panhandling, 64 percent of survey respondents had been panhandling for over a year. Just under a third (30 percent) had been panhandling for less than a year but more than three months, and a few had started within the past three months (figure 5). Most interview participants reported panhandling for several years, primarily in Virginia, though many had lived in other areas including New York, Houston, Philadelphia, and Florida.

FIGURE 5

Length of Time Panhandling

Percentage of survey respondents who reported panhandling for each length of time



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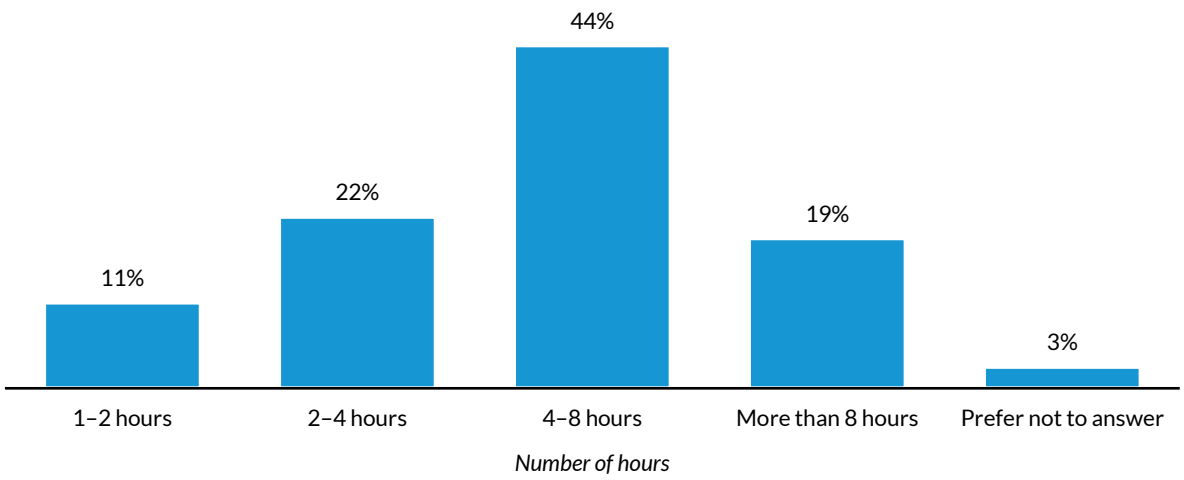
Source: Urban Institute survey on panhandling conducted between July and September 2025. Responses to question (12) How long have you been panhandling?
Notes: N=40.

When asked about the average amount of time spent panhandling, nearly half of respondents (44 percent) reported long hours—between four and eight hours per day. Almost one in five (20 percent) reported panhandling more than eight hours per day (figure 6). Additionally, half of respondents indicated that they panhandle seven days a week (figure 7). During canvassing, many respondents shared that they would continue panhandling until they had earned enough to cover their needs for the day, such as paying for a hotel room, buying food, or purchasing shoes and clothes.

FIGURE 6

Number of Hours Spent Panhandling

Percentage of respondents who reported panhandling for each average number of hours per day



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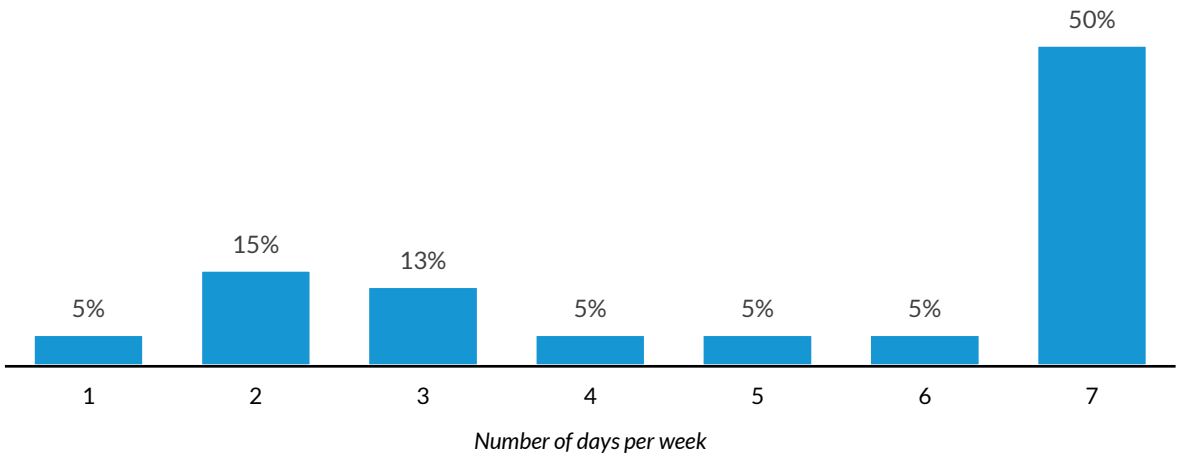
Source: Urban Institute survey on panhandling conducted between July and September 2025. Responses to question (14) On a typical day, how many hours do you panhandle?
Notes: N=36. Four respondents did not answer this question.

FIGURE 7

Average Number of Days Spent Panhandling per Week

Percentage of respondents who reported the number of days per week spent panhandling



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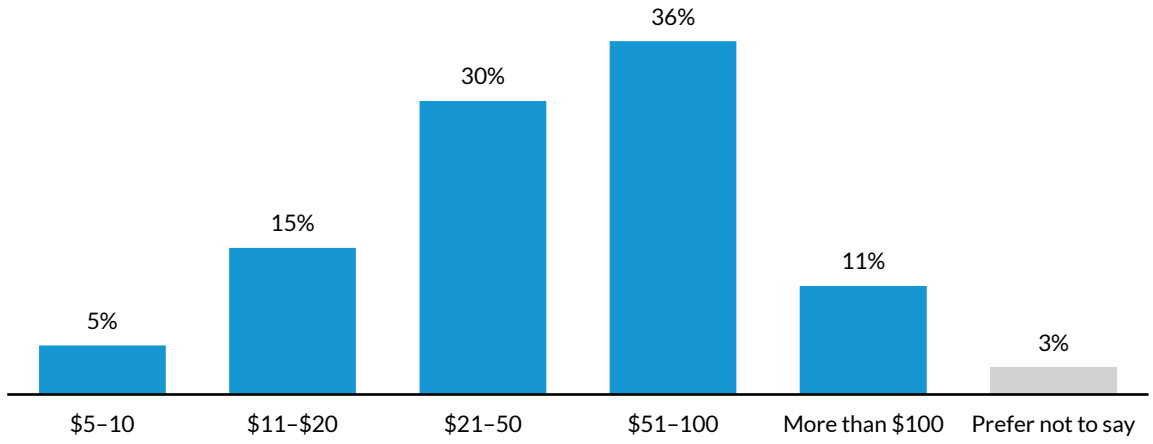
Source: Urban Institute survey on panhandling conducted between July and September 2025. Responses to question (15) In a typical week, how many days do you panhandle?
Notes: N=40

Finally, when asked about their estimated daily earnings from panhandling, 36 percent of respondents reported making between $51 and $100 per day. If these individuals panhandled seven days a week, this would amount to $17,136–$33,600 annually. Many respondents shared during canvassing that they panhandle every day, though the number of hours varies, as shown in figure 5. Some participants also noted they often need to spend more hours panhandling just to earn half of their usual amount. Overall, 50 percent estimated earning $50 a day or less, and only 11 percent reported making more than $100 per day (figure 8).

FIGURE 8

Earnings from Panhandling

Percentage of respondents who reported estimates of daily earnings from panhandling



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Source: Urban Institute survey on panhandling conducted between July and September 2025. Survey responses to question (13) On average, how much money do you typically receive from panhandling per day?
Notes: N=40

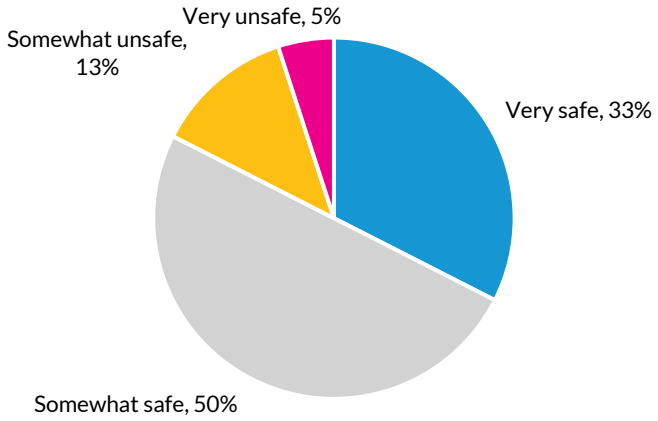
Feelings of Safety

To further understand respondents' experiences with panhandling, the survey explored individual circumstances and perceptions of safety in daily life and while panhandling. Most respondents reported feeling safe in their daily lives, with 50 percent indicating they feel "somewhat safe" and nearly one-third reporting they feel "very safe" (figure 9). Still, almost one in five respondents said they feel "somewhat unsafe" or "very unsafe." Responses to other safety-related questions were generally consistent with this overall pattern. For example, almost 70 percent of respondents indicated they had not received a threat against themselves (68 percent) or a loved one (68 percent) in the past month (figure 10).

FIGURE 9

Feelings of Safety in Daily Life

Percentage of respondents who reported feeling "very safe," "somewhat safe," "somewhat unsafe," and "very unsafe" in their daily life.



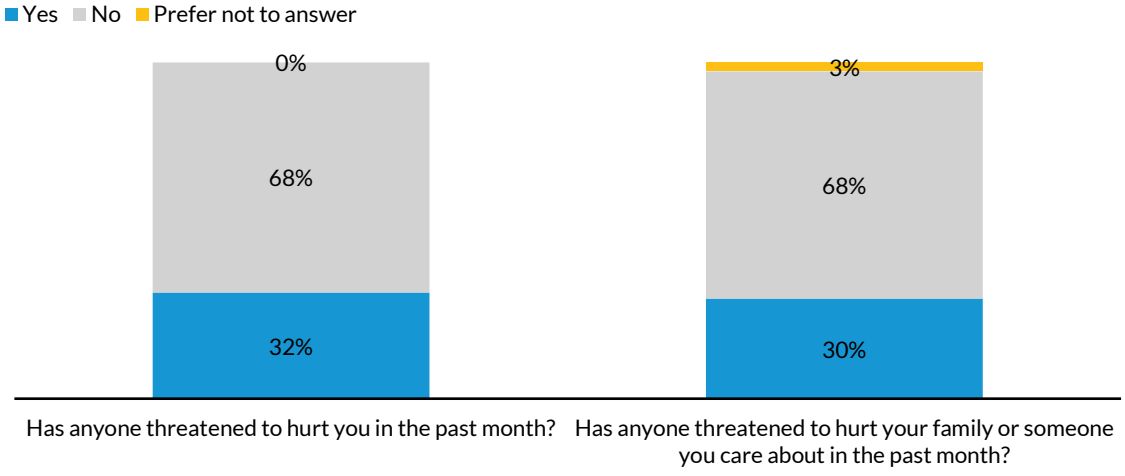
URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Urban Institute survey on panhandling conducted between July and September 2025. Responses to question (17) How safe do you feel in your daily life?
Notes: N=40.

FIGURE 10

Experiences with Threats to Safety

Percentage of respondents who reported experiences with threats to safety



URBAN INSTITUTE

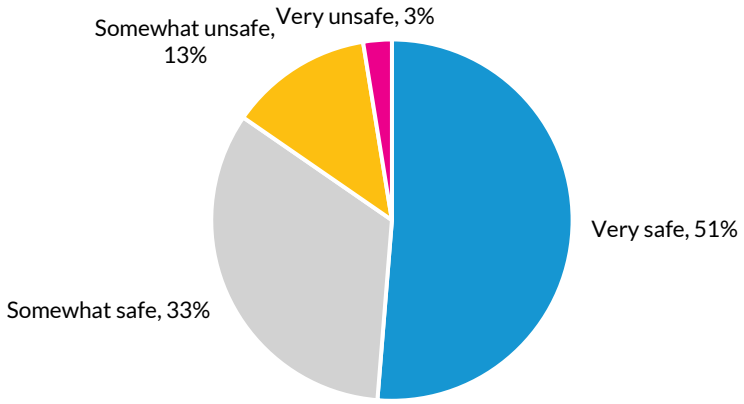
Source: Urban Institute survey on panhandling conducted between July and September 2025. Responses to questions (20) Has anyone threatened to hurt you in the past month? and (21) Has anyone threatened to hurt your family or someone you care about in the past month?
Notes: N=38; 37. Two respondents skipped question 20, and 3 respondents skipped question 21.

Responses to feelings of safety while panhandling were similar to those reported for daily life: most respondents said they feel "safe" or "very safe" (84 percent). Only 6 respondents (16 percent) reported feeling unsafe while panhandling (figure 11). Among these individuals, the most cited concerns included encounters with aggressive individuals, exposure to dangerous weather conditions, conflicts with other panhandlers, safety risks related to traffic or location, and fear of theft or robbery.

FIGURE 11

Feelings of Safety While Panhandling

Percentage of respondents who reported feeling "very safe," "somewhat safe," "somewhat unsafe," and "very unsafe" while panhandling.



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Urban Institute survey on panhandling conducted between July and September 2025. Responses to question (20) How safe do you feel while panhandling?
Notes: N= 39.

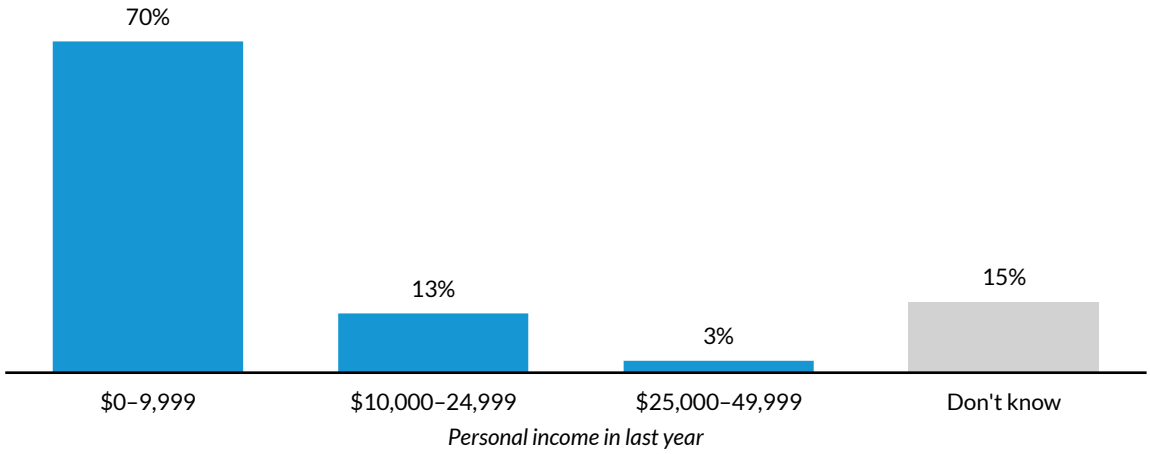
Income Sources and Amount

Understanding income levels and sources can provide additional insight into the economic challenges faced by people who panhandle. Most respondents (70 percent) reported an annual income of under $10,000 in the past year, and no respondents reported earning more than $50,000 annually. Fifteen percent of respondents were unable to estimate their personal income for the past year (figure 12).

FIGURE 12

Personal Income

Percentage of respondents who reported each level of personal income in the last year



URBAN INSTITUTE

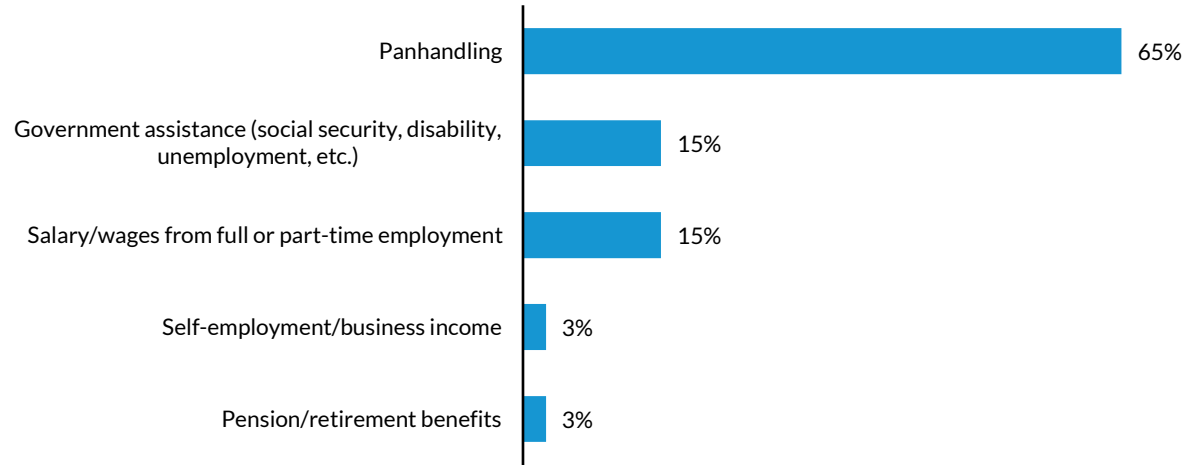
Source: Urban Institute survey on panhandling conducted between July and September 2025. Survey responses to question (9) Which of the following best describes your personal income last year?
Notes: N=40.

Sixty-five percent of respondents reported panhandling as their primary source of income with no other significant sources of income. Approximately 15 percent cited government assistance as their main source, with many specifically mentioning Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) (figure 13).

FIGURE 13

Primary Income Sources

Percentage of respondents who reported each primary source of income in the last year



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Urban Institute survey on panhandling conducted between July and September 2025. Survey responses to question (7) How do you primarily earn your income?
Notes: N=40. No participants reported receiving support from family or friends as a primary way of earning income.

Although six respondents (15 percent) reported earning income through part-time or full-time employment in the past year, ten respondents (25 percent) indicated that they had worked for pay at some point during that period. These ten respondents were then prompted to answer questions related to labor exploitation. See box 2 for a summary of those responses.

BOX 2

Feelings of Safety at Work and Labor Exploitation

The survey also examined employment safety through a series of questions assessing indicators of labor exploitation (Appendix B: questions 22–32). These questions were derived from validated human trafficking screening tools aligned with the federal Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, which defines measures of force, fraud, and coercion.

Among the 40 survey respondents, 10 percent (n = 4) reported being forced to engage in activities they considered to be illegal; three reported not being paid what they were promised; and three said they had worked in a place that they perceived to be scary or unsafe in the past 12 months. Overall, nine respondents answered "yes" to at least one labor-exploitation indicator. These findings suggest that homelessness and financial instability can increase vulnerability to unsafe work conditions or that unsafe work conditions may contribute to using panhandling as an alternative. Such experiences, however, were not widespread among the survey sample.

Source: Urban Institute survey on panhandling conducted between July and September 2025. Responses to labor exploitation questions 22, 23, and 28.
Notes: All participants were asked question 22; participants that had not worked in the 12 months prior to the survey were asked the remaining labor exploitation assessment questions. Read more about the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 at https://www.congress.gov/bill/106th-congress/house-bill/3244.

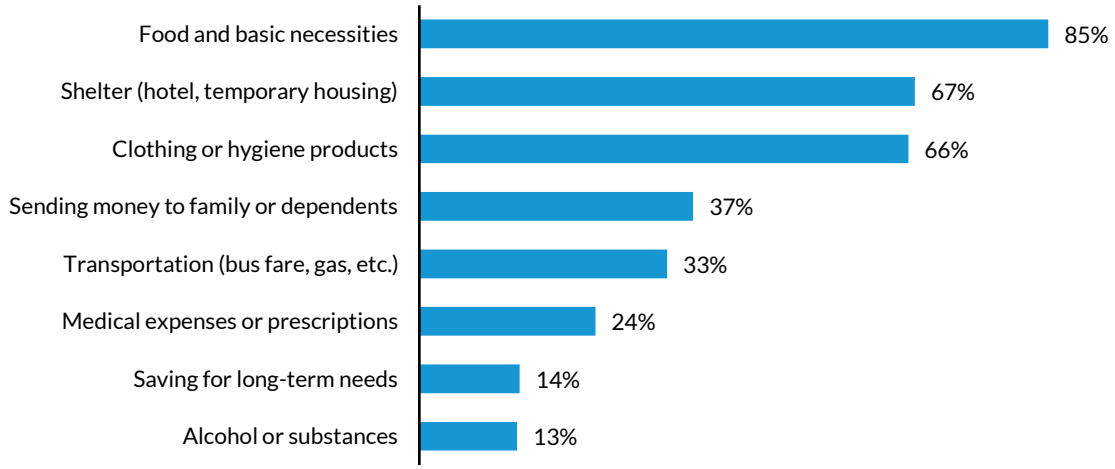
Spending Patterns

To understand spending priorities and patterns, respondents were asked how important panhandling income was for meeting specific needs. Nearly 85 percent reported that panhandling was "very important" for providing food and basic necessities (figure 14). Respondents also used money from panhandling to pay for temporary shelter or housing (67 percent) and clothing and hygiene products (66 percent). During canvassing, one respondent explained that they took part-time jobs when possible but relied on panhandling to cover the cost of a long-term hotel stay for their family of four, including two young children. At the time of the survey, they had been living in the hotel for almost eight months to avoid being outdoors or staying in an emergency shelter.

FIGURE 14

Uses of Panhandling Income for Meeting Needs

Percentage of respondents who marked each factor as "very important"



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Urban Institute survey on panhandling conducted between July and September 2025. Responses to question (16) How important is the money you receive from panhandling at providing you with the following?
Notes: N=39. One person did not respond to this question.

The needs most often rated as "not at all important" were medical expenses or prescriptions (63 percent) and alcohol or substances (53 percent). Some participants explained that most medical expenses were covered by Medicaid and several shared that they were not using alcohol or substances regularly. Based on these findings, panhandling earnings are critical to meeting the most basic needs and surviving homelessness and housing instability.

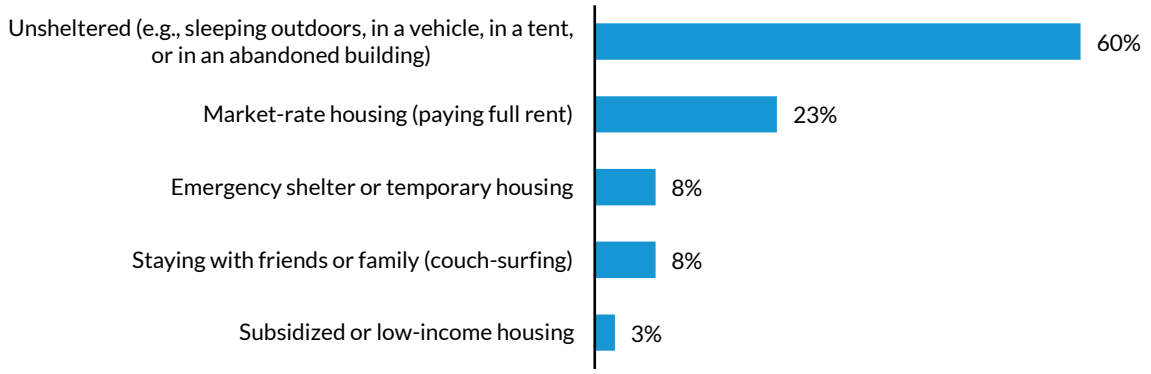
Housing Situation

To explore how housing circumstances intersect with respondents' experiences with panhandling, the research team asked respondents about their current living situation. At the time of the survey, 60 percent of respondents were experiencing unsheltered homelessness, meaning they were living outdoors, in a vehicle, a tent, or an abandoned building. The next most common situation was market-rate rental housing (23 percent). Other respondents reported staying in an emergency shelter or temporary housing like a hotel (8 percent), subsidized housing (3 percent), or with friends or family (8 percent; see figure 15).

FIGURE 15

Current Housing Situation

Percentage of respondents who reported currently living in each housing situation



URBAN INSTITUTE

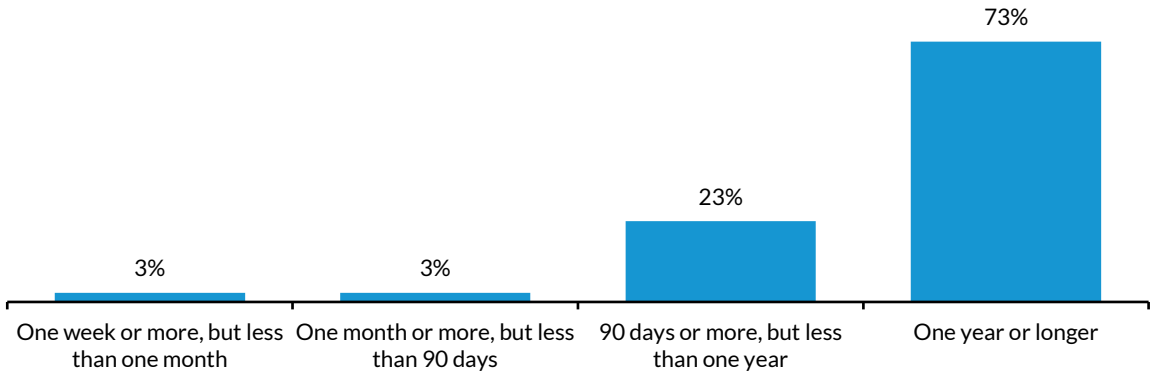
Source: Urban Institute survey on panhandling conducted between July and September 2025. Survey responses to question (5) Which of the following best describes your current living situation?
Note: N=40.

Although a few respondents had recently entered their current living situation, most (73 percent) had been in the same situation for more than a year, including those experiencing homelessness. About one-quarter (26 percent) had lived in their current situation for less than a year but more than three months (see figure 16).

FIGURE 16

Length of Time in Housing Situation

Percentage of respondents who reported each length of time in their current housing situation



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Urban Institute survey on panhandling conducted between July and September 2025. Survey responses to question (6) How long have you lived there (in current housing situation)?
Note: N=40.

Service Needs and Gaps

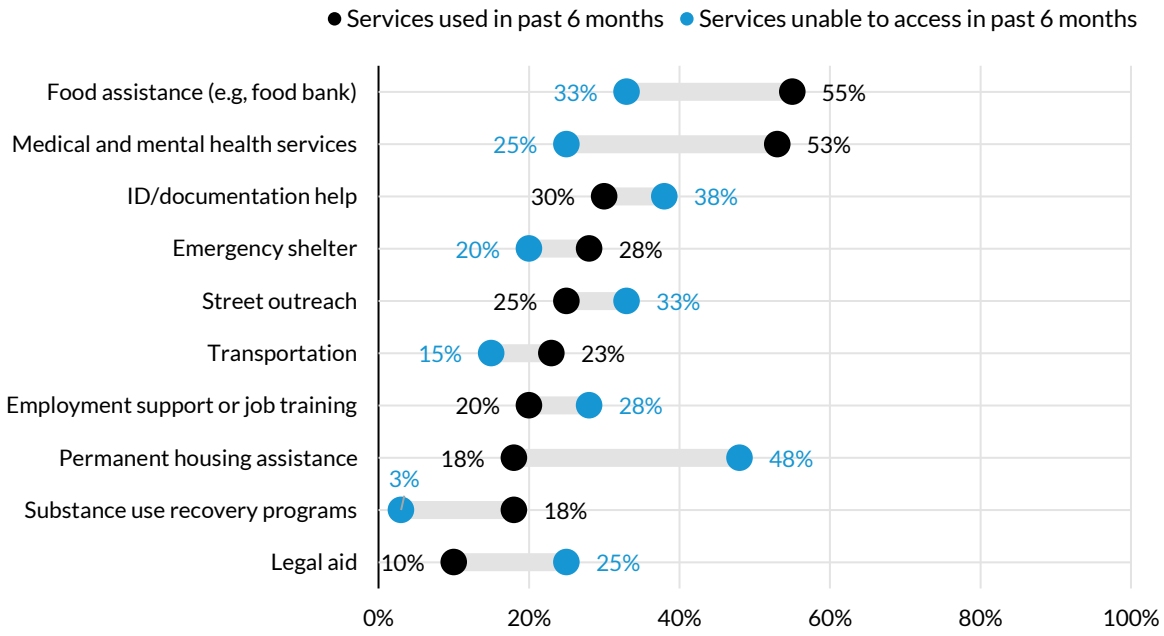
Survey and interview findings reveal gaps in access to essential services among the sample of individuals surveyed. To understand the resources and services needed by people who panhandle, respondents were asked about the specific types of services they had used and those they needed but were unable to access in the six months prior to completing the survey. In this section, we also summarize the findings from the in-depth interviews, which provide a closer look into service needs and gaps.

Although most respondents reported using food assistance and health services, unmet needs were most prevalent in permanent housing assistance, identification and documentation services, and street outreach programs. Figure 17 compares the services respondents had used with those they needed but could not access. Interviews highlighted systemic barriers to employment and health care, including high costs, language access issues, and complex navigation of benefits. Interview participants expressed a strong need for multilingual resource directories and clearer information on housing, job opportunities, and health care.

FIGURE 17

Services Utilization and Needs in Past Six Months

Percentage of respondents who reported accessing each service



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Urban Institute survey on panhandling conducted between July and September 2025. Responses to survey questions (3) Which types of services have you used in the last 6 months? and (4) Which types of services have you needed in the last 6 months but have not been able to access?

Notes: N=40. ID = Identification. Respondents who answered with "other" services used in the past 6 months named the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), family services, Street Sense, and the Lamb Center. Respondents who said that they used a service in the past six months may have also said that it was a service they needed in the past six months but were not able to access it.

Challenges in Accessing and Managing Care

Most respondents reported accessing medical and mental health services (53 percent) in the six months prior to the survey. Yet, one-quarter said they were unable to use these services when they needed them (figure 17). During canvassing, many respondents described living with chronic health conditions or a disability, a theme that also arose in interviews. All six interview participants reported having a disability or chronic health condition that required ongoing management, prompting them to seek care at clinics or doctors' offices. Despite this need, significant barriers to accessing care and managing their health persisted. The following section outlines these challenges in more detail.

Limited Information on How to Access Services

Although some interview participants were insured under Medicaid and visited doctors regularly, others described facing systemic barriers such as high health care costs, loss of insurance, and confusion about navigating services. One participant explained losing health coverage after job loss and now relies on safety-net clinics that offer low-cost medical care, supplementing expenses with money earned through panhandling. Another participant shared struggling for years to understand Medicaid benefits, underscoring the complexity of the system and the need for clearer guidance.

> **"Being able to access care, not knowing who to call. I have Medicaid, that's easy to obtain. But once you have it, where do I go? Who do I call? What do I do once I have Medicaid? And then it's like, people like myself are afraid to ask for help in a lot of ways. You kind of feel stuck, you don't know what to do once you have it. It took me years to figure out they offer so much with Medicaid."**
>
> *—Interview participant*

Lack of In-Language Resources, Particularly for Spanish-Speaking Participants

Spanish-speaking participants emphasized the importance of health care staff who provide in-language care to ensure clear communication about diagnoses and care instructions. Respondents expressed a desire for comprehensive information about available health services in Fairfax County, provided in multiple languages, to support informed decisions about treatment and medication.

Additionally, Spanish-speaking participants consistently preferred providers who could communicate in Spanish, citing language barriers as a source of confusion and mistrust. For example, one participant recalled receiving an injection intended to help quit smoking but was unable to identify the substance or remember when the procedure occurred, illustrating the challenges of limited communication. Another participant described delayed care for frostbite damage and severe infections, reflecting how homelessness and addiction disrupted regular medical visits.

Insufficient Awareness of Preventative Care and Affordable Health Care Providers

Most participants reported using health services regularly to manage chronic health conditions, obtain medications, and learn about other diagnoses. However, one Spanish-speaking participant shared that they only sought care during emergencies, despite expressing interest in physical therapy for back and leg pain. Beyond access issues, interview participants also described challenges in monitoring health. Participants described significant physical and mental health challenges that affect their daily lives and ability to work. All reported chronic health conditions or disabilities that limited their ability to work,

including diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, muscular pain, and mental health disorders including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Five participants visited a doctor regularly to manage these conditions, but Spanish-speaking participants lacked insurance and relied on affordable clinics.

One participant with multiple health issues, including recurring leg pain following an accident, said, "No me recuerdo la última vez que vi a un doctor. Nomás he ido dos veces. Como no tengo seguro, la última vez que fui [fue] en 2014, y fue por la espalda y la pierna. No va regularmente. Tal vez a la [sala de] emergencia." (Translation: "I don't remember the last time I went to see a doctor. I've only been twice. Because I don't have insurance, the last time I went was in 2014 and I went for my back and leg. I don't go regularly. If anything, [I go] to the emergency room.") The participant explained that in the 15 years they had lived in Virginia, they had only gone to the hospital a handful of times, despite having medical issues that require attention to prevent them from worsening. As the participant noted, they had only gone to the emergency room in dire situations, which is often the only form of medical care available to people without health insurance.

Challenges Managing Ongoing Health Needs

The greatest challenges in managing health for participants were obtaining prescribed medications and maintaining a healthy diet. These difficulties highlight respondents' reliance on food assistance and SNAP benefits: 55 percent of survey respondents reported using food assistance such as a food bank in the six months prior to the survey, and 33 percent of respondents said they were unable to access food assistance (figure 17). Two Spanish-speaking participants with diabetes and heart disease described difficulties with diet management; one had to cook separately because household meals were unhealthy, while the other lacked a kitchen and relied on ready-to-eat foods.

Transportation was another barrier to being able to properly manage health conditions; most participants depended on friends for rides to appointments or emergencies. One participant recounted experiencing a heart attack the night before the interview and relying on a friend for transport. Because the friend was not a relative, discharge instructions were provided without an interpreter, leaving the participant uncertain about their care.

Long-term consequences of homelessness were also evident. One participant described frostbite-related nerve damage, dental deterioration, and severe mental health conditions that developed during homelessness. They noted that fear of asking for help and lack of knowledge about Medicaid benefits hindered their ability to monitor health effectively. Only after connecting with local supportive programs like Pathways and Street Sense did they begin receiving consistent care.

> **"I never had mental health problems growing up … I developed these issues while being homeless."**
>
> *—Interview participant*

Barriers to Stable Housing

When asked about unmet needs, nearly half of survey respondents (48 percent) cited permanent housing assistance as their most pressing need, and fewer than 18 percent reported being able to access this service in the past six months (see figure 17). Across interviews, participants expanded on this need. Even those who lived in apartments or homes experienced great difficulty paying the rent and frustration that most of the money they receive through panhandling is used on rent, leaving little money for other needs, such as clothing or transportation. Participants explained that receiving a housing voucher would significantly improve their circumstances, as most currently spend the majority of their panhandling income on rent. Many expressed frustration with the high cost of housing and the financial strain it creates.

Interview participants described relying heavily on social networks to secure apartments or temporary housing. Five of the six participants had stayed in emergency shelters at some point, particularly during colder seasons. At the time of the interviews, four participants resided in apartments with roommates, while one Spanish-speaking participant reported living in a house and another reported living in a van owned by a close friend—yet all pay rent, including the individual living in the van. Participants emphasized that gaining access to stable housing allowed them to shift their focus toward long-term goals.

> **"[After being housed,] my thought process has changed. That's for sure. Before, it could be pouring rain that day and I'd still be standing out there in that crap. Now, I'm not. I'll be out there the next day it clears up. I don't have to put myself through that anymore."**
>
> *—Interview participant*

Despite being housed, most interview participants consistently reported that most of the money earned through panhandling goes toward rent, leaving little for other necessities. As noted previously, several expressed frustration with the high cost of housing, describing the financial strain as overwhelming. One Spanish-speaking participant shared, "Estoy rentando y la renta está demasiado cara. Pagando casi dos mil dólares y no trabajo para nada, bastante duro." (Translation: "I am renting and

the rent is too expensive. I am paying almost two thousand dollars and I don't work; it is very hard.") To alleviate this burden, one participant suggested a housing voucher could help: "I've got an apartment. I pay straight rent, so I have no extras. That's why I need a voucher." Another participant expressed interest in learning about government programs that provide affordable housing but were unsure where to begin. These accounts underscore the urgent need for accessible housing assistance programs and clear guidance on how to navigate them.

> **"Sería un peso menos para mí de andar pensando en la vivienda. Sé que, con el gobierno, hay para vivir en las casas que son de ellos, pero no sé qué programas o dónde ir. Me han dicho ir a la ciudad/alcaldía pero no he ido todavía.**
>
> *—Interview participant*

> **Translation: "It would be one less weight for me to be thinking about housing. I know that, with the government, there is enough to live in the houses that are theirs, but I don't know what programs or where to go. I've been told to go to the city or mayor's office, but I haven't gone yet."**

Barriers to Gainful Employment

Among survey respondents, 28 percent identified job support as a needed service (see figure 17). Most respondents were unemployed, while some relied on temporary jobs for additional income, often finding these opportunities through friends or acquaintances. Interview participants described common employment barriers, including: disability and health conditions; stigma and discrimination; and low wages and lack of transportation. Many also expressed interest in receiving information about well-paying jobs that offer accommodations for their needs. Two interview participants noted that age-related discrimination further limited their employment opportunities, as employers were reluctant to hire older adults.

At the time of the interviews, one participant was employed, four were actively seeking work, and one struggled to find a job that would allow them to maintain Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Several participants expressed a strong desire to work but faced discrimination based on age or physical limitations. One participant shared that an employer stopped offering him work after perceiving him as "too old," stating, "Un señor me ayudaba con trabajo, pero como me vio viejo, rapidito cambió. Ya no hablamos, pero todavía recoge a muchachos [para trabajo]." (Translation: "A man helped me with work, but because he saw me as an old man, he quickly changed. We don't talk anymore, but he still picks up

guys [for work].") Another participant reported being denied opportunities due to a leg amputation resulting from diabetes. These experiences underscore significant barriers—ageism, disability discrimination, and income restrictions—that limit employment options for individuals in vulnerable situations.

Transportation challenges further compounded these barriers. None of the participants had reliable access to transportation; most relied on buses or walking to reach panhandling locations, stores, or other destinations. Only one participant we spoke with occasionally borrowed cars from friends or acquaintances to travel longer distances. See box 3 for the experiences of participants who benefited from social support and networks in gaining employment.

BOX 3

Benefits of Social Networks in Gaining Employment

Some participants shared that their friends connected them with employment opportunities. One participant with a disabling condition washed cars and cut grass for friends and acquaintances and received some payment for that. Another participant explained that Street Sense Media, which is a newspaper by and about Washington, DC's unhoused community, helped them find employment and professional help to treat drug addiction. The participant learned about Street Sense through a person who was selling the newspaper on the street and appreciated that Street Sense staff continued reaching out to them until they got the help they needed:

> *"I've been homeless a long time and I just signed my lease through Pathways for Housing and I move in on the first. It's amazing, especially after all this time … Street Sense Media is who helped me secure it … They got me safe and sober and connected me to housing. Street Sense Media has played a huge role in helping change my life from really bad to really great."*

Source: Urban Institute interviews with people engaging in panhandling.

Low Awareness and Limited Access to Services

Other top unmet needs included help obtaining identification documents (38 percent), accessing food banks (33 percent), and receiving outreach services (33 percent) (figure 17). In interviews, all Spanish-speaking participants requested a resource list in multiple languages. Although the research team provided a list created by the Fairfax County Department of Housing and Community Development—available in both English and Spanish—participants expressed interest in a more comprehensive directory of organizations, programs, and services available in the county.

Based on interviews, access to benefits, particularly from government-sponsored programs, varied among participants. Most prominently, this varied access depended on awareness of eligibility requirements:

- Some participants were aware of the eligibility requirements and, therefore, were able to access government programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Medicaid. Consequently, these participants, although still facing precarity and needing to panhandle, had more support than individuals who were not aware of the eligibility requirements.
- Participants who did not report governmental support for various reasons, including limited knowledge of the eligibility requirements, often relied on support from community organizations, churches, or people in their networks.

Perceptions of Panhandling

As interviews concluded, participants reflected on public attitudes toward panhandling and what they wished others understood. Their perspectives highlighted two central themes: (1) widespread misconceptions, including stereotypes that portray panhandling as a choice rather than a necessity; and (2) the daily challenges of survival, which shed light on the realities behind panhandling and the barriers individuals face in meeting basic needs.

Misconceptions about Panhandling

Participants were aware of the common stereotypes associated with panhandling, particularly the belief that people panhandle because they do not want to work. Among interviewees, most had worked for most of their lives and panhandled out of necessity. When asked what they would like others to know about people who panhandle, one participant replied, “Ask for help if you need it. If you don’t [need help], give to others. Don’t judge [those who panhandle] because from one day to another, you could be worse off. Life is a roulette.” By drawing on a roulette imagery, this participant highlights what many can experience: life circumstance can change suddenly. For some participants, the ability to work changed overnight after a work accident or health issue. These experiences often go unseen or are overshadowed by persistent stereotypes. Participants either deflected these tropes or avoided thinking about them altogether, focusing instead on the necessity of panhandling.

> **"I wish people knew we're just people too. Everybody has things happen to them in their lives. I'm not a criminal, I'm not a bad person. I've met bad people out there, but not everybody is like that … A lot of people, they just need somebody to reach out and help them. I wish people knew that homeless people are just people too. Everybody has a story and everybody's story is different. Panhandlers are just people. An act of kindness can save somebody's life. There were days I really didn't think I'd wake up the next morning, and someone would come up and hand me $20 and it would change my whole perspective."**
>
> *—Interview participant*

Daily Challenges of Survival

It is no exaggeration to say that most interviewees were surviving with the bare minimum. When asked the closing question, "Is there anything about yourself or your experience that we didn't discuss that you want me to know?" one participant replied, "Right now, I'm okay. I'm just trying to survive."

The statement about "solely trying to survive" was not an exaggeration among survey respondents. Interview participants described finding shelter in shared cars, eating only one meal a day, and living with debilitating health conditions—such as heart problems or physical disabilities—without consistent care, money, or social support. Most survey respondents reported relying on food banks and SNAP benefits, seeking emergency care, and needing specialty health services to manage health conditions. Occasional support came from churches or organizations, and borrowing money most often occurred among other people who panhandle. Beyond that, they navigated daily life on the streets, doing their best to get by.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Findings from the field surveys and interviews highlight important gaps in access to housing, health care, employment, and information about available services. Although Fairfax County offers programs for affordable housing, health care for people experiencing homelessness, emergency assistance, and job resources, many individuals who panhandle remain unaware of these opportunities or face barriers such as language, technology, and transportation. Participants consistently expressed a need for clear, accessible information and proactive outreach. The following recommendations aim to reduce barriers

and improve support for individuals who panhandle, focusing on housing stability, health care access, employment opportunities, and strategies for inclusive communication.

- **Expand street outreach services for people who panhandle.** More than one third of survey respondents said they would like to receive outreach, and many shared that the survey team was the first time anyone had reached out to them to discuss their overall well-being and housing situation. Additionally, many survey respondents did not have reliable access to a phone or the internet. Strengthening in-person outreach can help close these gaps and connect individuals to critical resources, including housing support, affordable health care, and employment opportunities and training.
- **Improve language access and support, especially for Spanish-speakers.** Although Fairfax County acknowledged this need by requesting Spanish-speaking capabilities for the research team, Spanish-speaking interview participants still expressed frustration that many services are primarily available in English and reported limited access to translation or interpretation. The county and local community-based organizations should prioritize providing in-language materials, bilingual staff, and interpretation, and most importantly, delivering information through in-person outreach to better connect Spanish-speaking populations with the appropriate services. It is important to note that because the survey was limited to English and Spanish speakers, access for other non-English speakers is still unknown.
- **Increase awareness of housing programs and services.** All interview participants requested information on accessible services or shared challenges with finding them. Nearly half of survey respondents wanted permanent housing assistance, and 78 percent were experiencing homelessness or unstable housing–underscoring a critical need. Although Fairfax County offers a comprehensive set of services, including affordable housing, emergency shelter, rent assistance, and assistance with basic needs,[3] many individuals were not aware of these resources. Those who had accessed services previously often learned about them from other people who panhandle rather than official channels. Outreach programs should prioritize sharing this information directly with people who panhandle.
- **Improve access to affordable health care services.** Although most survey respondents reported using medical or mental health care recently, 25 percent could not access care, and 25 percent said medical expenses were a major reason for panhandling. Interviews revealed persistent barriers such as limited information on where to go, lack of Spanish-language resources, and insufficient awareness of affordable providers. The county should provide clear,

multilingual information about health care services—including Medicaid benefits, low-cost clinics, and specialty care options—and offer guidance on navigating insurance programs to reduce confusion and fear of asking for help.

- **Enhance employment support, information sharing, and connections to income benefits.** Many survey respondents and interview participants expressed a strong desire to work but faced barriers such as discrimination, poor health, and disabilities. Survey findings show that 28 percent of respondents needed employment services. Fairfax County offers job seeker support through its One-Stop Employment Resource Center Services, with services available in multiple languages.[4] However, interview participants were often unaware of this resource. Expanding outreach and clearly communicating available resources—such as career guidance, resume reviews, job search assistance, application support, and help navigating income benefits like Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI)—could help connect individuals to employment opportunities These interviews expanded on the survey domains and explored additional topics related to health and well-being and perceptions of panhandling.
- **Strengthen county-wide service networks through nontraditional collaborations.** Because people who panhandle are a hard-to reach population, partnerships between street outreach efforts and local businesses, churches, and other faith-based organizations could improve the identification and engagement of people who panhandle or are at risk of panhandling. These collaborations can build a more coordinated network that takes a holistic approach to efficiently linking people with housing, health care, and employment support.

Conclusion

The sample of people surveyed and interviewed who panhandle in Fairfax County represent a diverse demographic, navigating significant economic hardship, homelessness, housing instability, and barriers to employment. Their experiences reveal complex challenges tied to health, safety, and social stigma. Findings also indicate a strong demand for resources such as housing assistance, employment opportunities, and access to basic needs and supportive services. Strengthening these services can help address the underlying drivers of panhandling, promote stability, and improve overall well-being. Together, these insights underscore the importance of targeted, accessible interventions to meet both immediate and long-term needs.

Appendix A. Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection Activities

TABLE A.1

Overview of Data Collection Activities

Data collection activity	Eligibility	Target number of respondents	Actual number of respondents
Field surveys	Individuals who are 18 years or older, are English or Spanish speaking, and are actively panhandling in Fairfax County during the data collection period.	40	40
Qualitative interviews	Survey participants who consent to be contacted and express interest in participating.	8	6

Source: Urban Institute surveys and interviews with people engaging in panhandling in Fairfax County between July and November 2025.

Notes: Because many survey respondents lacked reliable access to a phone or the internet, most were unable to provide contact information for follow-up. The research team was able to reach three individuals by phone and completed remote interviews with them. For the remaining interview participants, the team returned to the locations where survey respondents regularly panhandle to conduct in-person interviews. In total, six individuals were interviewed; most were men and represented a mix of English and Spanish speakers between the ages of 35 and 75.

Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

Field Surveys

Field surveys were initially planned to be conducted over a 10-day period with individuals actively engaging in panhandling in Fairfax County. However, the survey collection period was extended to 20 days over a 7-week period to be able to reach the target respondent number. During this time, the research team canvassed between three and five hours a day at varying times throughout each day. Canvassing periods were staffed by two researchers and supported surveying in English and Spanish. Prior to conducting a survey, researchers read aloud the consent statement and emphasized the following key components: (1) the purpose of the survey; (2) the voluntary nature of the survey; (3) the definition of confidential/confidentiality and; (4) the risks and benefits associated with choosing to participate in the study.

Survey data was recorded using Qualtrics, a secure online survey tool that meets HIPAA data-protection standards.[5] Participants who preferred not to complete the survey independently had the option to participate through an in-person or phone interview. For in-person surveys, researchers used encrypted tablets provided by Urban that were preloaded with the survey. Although no personally identifiable information (PII) was collected, responses were recorded offline during fieldwork and securely uploaded following the end of each day when WiFi became available. Each interaction was assigned a unique identifier, and researchers documented the location (e.g., nearest address or intersection) along with whether the individual consented to participate. If a participant declined, their reason was recorded if one was provided. Participants received a $20 gift card for participating.

Follow-Up Interviews

Six interviews, each lasting 45 to 60 minutes, were conducted with survey participants who expressed interest in doing so after completing a survey. The interviews were primarily conducted either over the phone (via Microsoft Teams) or in-person by a co–principal investigator and a support staff person. The research team ensured that interviews could be conducted in either English or Spanish, according to the respondent's preferences.

A support staff person took notes on an encrypted laptop and interviews were recorded with the permission of interview participants. Interviews were not recorded for participants who declined. Any audio recordings will be deleted as soon as possible following verification; any data regardless of the status of analysis will be deleted by one year after the end date of the project at the latest. Regarding consent, the lead researcher explained to participants that the research team is obligated to ensure the confidentiality of their comments, read consent language aloud using the interview protocol, and obtained oral consent. Similar to the survey, the consent procedure included comprehension checks to ensure participants understood (1) the purpose of the interview; (2) the voluntary nature of the interview; (3) the definition of confidential/confidentiality and; (4) the risks and benefits associated with choosing to participate in the interview. Participants received a $35 gift card for participating.

Following the data collection period, we exported data from Qualtrics and ran basic statistical analysis using Stata.[6] We cleaned and analyzed the survey data to identify trends and descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, range, means, medians) across the entire county, noting that small sample sizes may limit more granular (i.e., district-specific) analyses. For interviews, we organized and categorized key themes closely linked to our research questions and domains. We worked iteratively to ensure that we captured both consistent themes and unusual or rare observations across data sources. All research methods were reviewed and approved by Urban's Institutional Review Board in July 2025.

Appendix B. Panhandling Survey Tool

Study Name

Panhandling in Fairfax County

Background

The Urban Institute is conducting a study to better understand the needs and experiences of people who engage in panhandling activities in Fairfax County. The study is funded by the Fairfax County Department of Housing and Community Development and includes a survey and interviews with people who panhandle. Findings from this survey, combined with responses from interviews, will be analyzed to produce a non-public, written report to the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors.

Survey Instructions

This survey includes up to 39 questions across seven categories: (1) Service Needs, (2) Housing Situation, (3) Income Sources and Amount, (4) Panhandling Experiences, (5) Spending Patterns, (6) Feelings of Safety, and (7) About You.

It should take about 15 minutes to complete. Participants can skip or refuse to answer any of the questions after answering the required screening questions.

[Required] Eligibility Screening

Please answer the following questions to confirm your eligibility for this survey.

1. Are you aged 18 or older?

[If yes, proceed]

[If no, end the survey] Unfortunately, you are not eligible for this survey. Thank you for your interest and time.

2. What language would you like to complete this survey in?

[If English, proceed with English survey]

[If Spanish, proceed with Spanish survey]

[If unable to complete in English or Spanish] Unfortunately, you are not eligible for this survey. Thank you for your interest and time.

3. Panhandling means asking people for money or food for personal needs without offering anything in exchange. Have you actively engaged in panhandling activities in the last six months?

[*If yes, proceed to consent]*

[If no, end the survey] Unfortunately, you are not eligible for this survey. Thank you for your interest and time.

Survey

Please answer each question to the best of your ability. **You may skip any question if you prefer not to answer and end the survey at any time.**

Page 1: Introduction

1. What is your favorite season?
    a. Spring
    b. Summer
    c. Fall
    d. Winter

2. What are some activities you enjoy doing outdoors?
    a. Hiking
    b. Sightseeing
    c. Running
    d. Playing sports
    e. Going out for a picnic
    f. Walking
    g. Other

Page 2: Service Needs

3. Which types of services have you used in the last 6 months?

	Yes	No	Prefer not to answer
a. Emergency shelter			
b. Food assistance like a food bank			
c. Permanent housing assistance			
d. Medical or mental health services			
e. Employment support or job training			
f. Substance use recovery programs			
g. Transportation assistance			
h. Legal aid			
i. Identification or documentation help			
j. Street outreach services			
k. Other (please specify): _____			

4. Which types of services have you needed in the last 6 months but have not been able to access?

	Yes	No	Prefer not to answer
a. Emergency shelter			
b. Food assistance like a food bank			
c. Permanent housing assistance			
d. Medical or mental health services			
e. Employment support or job training			
f. Substance use recovery programs			
g. Transportation assistance			
h. Legal aid			
i. Identification or documentation help			
j. Street outreach services			
k. Other (please specify): _____			

Page 3: Housing Situation

*The following questions are about your **housing situation**. Some questions may be uncomfortable to answer. If this happens, please let me know and we can slow down, take a break, or you can end the survey at any time.*

5. Which of the following best describes your current living situation?
    a. Unsheltered (e.g., sleeping outdoors, in a vehicle, in a tent, or in an abandoned building)
    b. Emergency shelter or temporary housing
    c. Transitional housing program
    d. Staying with friends or family (couch-surfing)
    e. Subsidized or low-income housing
    f. Market-rate housing (paying full rent)
    g. Other (please specify)
    h. Prefer not to answer

6. How long have you lived there?
    a. One night or less
    b. Two to six nights
    c. One week or more, but less than one month
    d. One month or more, but less than 90 days
    e. 90 days or more, but less than one year
    f. One year or longer
    g. Don't know
    h. Prefer not to answer

Page 4: Income Sources and Amount

*The following questions are about **your income.** Some questions may be uncomfortable to answer. If this happens, please let me know and we can slow down, take a break, or you can end the survey at any time.*

7. How do you primarily earn your income? *Select only one.*
    a. Salary/Wages from full or part-time employment
    b. Self-employment/Business income
    c. Pension/Retirement benefits
    d. Government assistance (social security, disability, unemployment, etc.)
    e. Support from family/friends
    f. Panhandling
    g. Other (please specify)

8. **[SKIP if b-g is selected in Question 7]** If your primary income is from a salary, what other sources of income do you have? *Select all that apply.*
    a. Self-employment/Business income
    b. Pension/Retirement benefits
    c. Government assistance (social security, disability, unemployment, etc.)
    d. Support from family/friends
    e. Panhandling
    f. Other (specify)

9. Which of the following best describes your personal income last year?
    a. $0-$9,999
    b. $10,000-$24,999
    c. $25,000-$49,999
    d. $50,000-$74,999
    e. $75,000-$99,999
    f. $100,000-$149,999
    g. $150,000+
    h. Don't know
    i. Prefer not to answer

10. If you live with other people, what is the total income of the people you live with?
    a. $0-$9,999
    b. $10,000-$24,999
    c. $25,000-$49,999
    d. $50,000-$74,999
    e. $75,000-$99,999
    f. $100,000-$149,999
    g. $150,000+
    h. I don't live with anyone else.
    i. Don't know
    j. Prefer not to answer

Page 5: Panhandling Experiences

11. What are the main reasons that you panhandle?

	Major reason	Minor reason	Not a reason
a. Lack of stable housing			
b. Limited or no income from employment			
c. Difficulty accessing social services or benefits			
d. Need for food and basic necessities			
e. Medical expenses or health-related challenges			
f. Support for family or dependents			
g. Barriers to employment (e.g., lack of documentation, past incarceration)			
h. Substance use or addiction-related needs			
i. Other (please specify)			

12. How long have you been panhandling?
    a. One night or less
    b. Two to six nights
    c. One week or more, but less than one month
    d. One month or more, but less than 90 days
    e. 90 days or more, but less than one year
    f. One year or longer
    g. Don't know
    h. Prefer not to answer

13. On average, how much money do you typically receive from panhandling per day?
    a. Less than $5
    b. $5 – $10
    c. $11 – $20
    d. $21 – $50
    e. $51 – $100
    f. More than $100
    g. Prefer not to answer

14. On a typical day, how many **hours** do you panhandle?
    a. Less than one hour
    b. One to two hours
    c. Two to four hours
    d. Four to eight hours
    e. More than eight hours
    f. Prefer not to answer

15. On a typical week, how many **days** do you panhandle?
    a. One
    b. Two
    c. Three
    d. Four
    e. Five
    f. Six
    g. Seven
    h. Prefer not to answer

Page 6: Spending Patterns

16. How important is the money you receive from panhandling at providing you with the following:

	Very important	Somewhat important	Not too important	Not at all important
a. Food and basic necessities				
b. Transportation (bus fare, gas, etc.)				
c. Shelter (hotel, temporary housing)				
d. Medical expenses or prescriptions				
e. Clothing or hygiene products				
f. Sending money to family or dependents				
g. Alcohol or substances				
h. Saving for long-term needs				
i. Other (please specify)				

Page 7: Feelings of Safety

*[In-person] The following questions are about **how safe you feel in your daily life and while panhandling**. Some questions may be uncomfortable to answer. If this happens, please let me know if you want to slow down, take a break, or end the survey.*

17. How safe do you feel in your daily life?
    a. Very safe
    b. Somewhat safe
    c. Somewhat unsafe
    d. Very unsafe
    e. Don't know
    f. Prefer not to answer

18. Has anyone threatened to hurt you in the past month?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Don't know
    d. Prefer not to answer

19. Has anyone threatened to hurt your family or someone you care about in the past month?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Don't know
    d. Prefer not to answer

20. How safe do you feel while panhandling?
    a. Very safe
    b. Somewhat safe
    c. Somewhat unsafe
    d. Very unsafe
    e. Don't know
    f. Prefer not to answer

21. If you feel unsafe while panhandling, what are the main reasons you feel unsafe while panhandling?

	Major reason	Minor reason	Not a reason
a. Encounters with aggressive individuals			
b. Threats or harassment from the public			
c. Negative interactions with law enforcement			
d. Fear of theft or robbery			
e. Exposure to dangerous weather conditions			
f. Conflict with other panhandlers			
g. Safety concerns related to traffic or location			
h. Health risks or vulnerability due to illness			
i. Other (please specify)			

22. Some people engage in illegal activities, whether they understand it or not, for their employers or for the people they work with. During the past 12 months, were you forced to engage in activities that you considered illegal?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Don't know
    d. Prefer not to answer

23. In the past 12 months, did anyone you worked for refuse to pay or kept all or most of the money that was promised?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Don't know
    d. Prefer not to answer

24. In the past 12 months, did someone you work for physically beat, slap, kick, punch, burn, or hurt you in any way?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Don't know
    d. Prefer not to answer

25. In the past 12 months, have you found it impossible to leave the place where you worked or talk to people you wanted to talk to because the person you worked for threatened or controlled you?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Don't know
    d. Prefer not to answer

26. In the past 12 months, have you been forced to engage in sexual acts in exchange for money, drugs, or anything else, regardless of the gender of the people involved?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Don't know
    d. Prefer not to answer

27. In the last 12 months, were you tricked into doing a different job than promised?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Don't know
    d. Prefer not to answer

28. In the past 12 months, have you worked or done other things in a place that made you feel scared or unsafe?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Don't know
    d. Prefer not to answer

29. In the past 12 months, have you been asked to lie when talking to others about the work you do or did?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Don't know
    d. Prefer not to answer

30. In the past 12 months, did someone you worked for not allow you to contact your family or friends, even when you were not working?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Don't know
    d. Prefer not to answer

31. In the past 12 months, did anyone you worked for withhold your identity documents (e.g. official ID, license, passport, birth certificate)?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Don't know
    d. Prefer not to answer

32. In the past 12 months, have you been afraid to leave or resign from a work situation because of fears of violence or threats of harm to yourself or your family?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Don't know
    d. Prefer not to answer

Page 8: About You

Finally, we have a few questions about you so that we can combine your responses with others like you.

33. What is your age?
    a. 18 to 24 years
    b. 25 to 34 years
    c. 35 to 44 years
    d. 45 to 54 years
    e. 55 to 64 years
    f. 65 to 74 years
    g. 75 to 84 years
    h. 84 years or older
    i. Prefer not to answer

34. How do you identify your gender? *Select all that apply.*
    a. Woman
    b. Man
    c. Culturally Specific Identity (e.g., Two Spirit)
    d. Transgender
    e. Non-Binary
    f. Questioning
    g. Different Identity
    h. Don't know
    i. Prefer not to answer

35. Which of the following best describes your ethnicity or race? *Select all that apply.*
    a. American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous
    b. Asian or Asian American
    c. Black, African American, or African
    d. Hispanic/Latina/e/o
    e. Middle Eastern or North African
    f. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
    g. White
    h. Don't know
    i. Prefer not to answer.

36. Have you ever served in the US Military (including the National Guard or Reserves)?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Don't know
    d. Prefer not to answer

37. What language do you primarily speak with the people you live with?
    a. English
    b. Spanish
    c. Other (please specify):
    d. Prefer not to answer

38. How many people do you live with?
    a. 0 (I live by myself)
    b. 1
    c. 2
    d. 3
    e. 4
    f. More than 4
    g. Prefer not to answer

39. How many children/dependents under 18 do you currently live with?
    a. 1
    b. 2
    c. 3
    d. 4
    e. 5
    f. More than 5
    g. Prefer not to answer

Thank you for completing the survey. We would like to learn more about your experiences while panhandling in a phone interview. If you are interested in sharing more about your experiences over a phone call with the research team, please provide your contact information to the research team.

Appendix C. Panhandling Interview Guide

Background

- To get started, can you tell me a little about yourself?
    - PROBES:
        - Where are you from?
        - Have you always been in this area of northern Virginia?
        - [If no]: How long have you been in the area/northern Virginia?

- To guide the rest of our conversation, can you share a little bit about what your working and living situation is like?

- And what is the number one thing you need help with right now?

- Is there anything else you'd like to share about yourself before we continue?

Health and well-being

Thank you, that's really helpful to know. The next few questions are about your health and well-being.

- We know that housing issues and homelessness can be really hard on a person's physical and mental health. If you're comfortable, can you tell me how that has been for you?
    - PROBE: Do you have any health conditions?
    - If participant says they have a health condition: how long have you had [the health condition]?

- How would you rate your physical health now?
    - PROBE: Is it poor, fair, good or great?
    - How has your physical health changed in the last year?

- How would you rate your mental health now?
    - PROBE: Is it poor, fair, good or great?
    - How has your mental health changed in the last year?

- Do you see a doctor regularly?

- What is the most challenging thing about managing [the health condition]?
    - What has been helpful with overcoming some of these challenges?

- What does good healthcare look like to you?

- What does being healthy look like to you?
    - What kinds of things would help with your health?
        - PROBES: Insurance coverage, ADL/IADL support, primary care access/transportation.

Experience with Panhandling

Everything we've talked about so far has been really helpful in understanding your circumstances. Thank you for sharing all of that. The next questions are about your experiences with panhandling.

- When did you first start panhandling?
    - So that's [X years/months]. When you first started did you imagine you would be panhandling for a long period of time?
    - Do you remember what you were thinking or feeling when you decided to start?
        - PROBES:
            - Why did you start panhandling?
            - What fears did you have when you started?
    - Has your impression of panhandling changed in any way since you first started?
        - How so?
- I know you shared some of this already in the survey, but can you remind me what are the main reasons you started?
    - Have any of these reasons changed over time?
        - How so?
    - Do you support anyone with the money you make from panhandling?
    - What are the main things you spend money on?
- Do you have a typical place you go to panhandle?
    - How did you choose this location?
    - How far is it from where you live?
        - How do you commute?
    - Do you panhandle anywhere else?
- Can you remind me, how often you panhandle?
    - How much do you typically earn in a day?
    - How many hours?
- How secure do you feel with being able to meet all your basic needs?

Housing

The next few questions are about your current housing situation. Some of these questions may be sensitive. Please let me know if you need a break or would like to skip any questions.

- You mentioned that you live in [place named in background], can you tell me more about what it's like to live there?
    - PROBE:
        - How comfortable you feel in your current home?
        - Do you have friends and family nearby?
        - Do you shop in your neighborhood?
            - Where?

        - How do you get around your neighborhood?
            - Do you feel comfortable and safe outside of your home during the day? What about at night?

- **[If housed]** How long have you lived there?
    - How did you come to live here?
    - What do you like about your home?
        - What don't you like?
        - What would you like to change?
    - How many bedrooms are in your home?
    - How many people do you live with?
    - What challenges have you experienced in your current home?
        - PROBE: Do you pay rent or a mortgage?
            - If so, do you receive any financial support for helping to pay your rent/mortgage?
    - [housing instability] How sure do you feel about staying in this home for the next six months?
        - Where would you like to live?

- **[If currently experiencing homelessness]** How long have you been homeless?
    - How safe do you feel where you are staying?
    - Can you tell me more about where you were living before you became homeless and what happened?
    - In the last six months, has anyone helped you with finding a house?
        - If yes, who?
            - Probes:
                - How did you first meet them?
                - Are you still meeting with them to find a house?
                - Did/have they help/ed you with any other services or resources?
                    - If so, what kind of services?
        - If no, would you want someone to help you with finding a house?
            - Probes:
                - What kinds of things would you want that person to help you with?
                - Where and how would you prefer to meet them?
                Have you been to an emergency shelter or similar place in the last 6 months? Why or why not?

Income and Employment

The next questions are about your income and work situation.

- Do you currently have any work?
    - If yes, can you tell me what it's like to work there?
        - Probes:
            - What kind of work is it?
            - How long have you worked there?
            - Full-time or part-time?
            - How do you get to work?
            - What do you like about your job?
            - What do you not like about your job?

            - How safe do you feel at work?

    - If no, when was the last time you had a job/work?
        - Can you tell me about what that was like
        - Why did you stop working?
        - Are you receiving any financial support from programs or other services?
            - If so, what are they?
            - How helpful are these supports and services?

    - [If not able to work (i.e., disability)] You mentioned you have a disability/health condition, do you receive SSI, SSDI or other benefit?
        - How helpful are these supports and services?

- Has anyone ever helped you with finding a job?
    - If so, who?
    - What was that like?
    - Is that something you think you need or want help with now?

Wrap Up

- Perceptions about panhandling:
    - What do you wish people knew about people who panhandle?
    - What do you think are some misconceptions?

- Service needs:
    - If someone came up to you today and offered to help you with whatever you needed, what would you ask for?

- Is there anything about yourself or your experiences that we haven't discussed today or something that we did discuss that you want me to know more about?

Notes

[1] Katie Lusso, "Officials Say Panhandling Is a Growing Problem in Northern Virginia," WUSA9, August 18, 2023, https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/local/virginia/townhall-held-to-address-panhandling-concerns-in-prince-william-fairfax-counties/65-407e3da3-0a30-4c73-825f-7940a925028c.

[2] The response rate is calculated as the total number of complete surveys divided by the total number of people approached during canvassing (40/53=75 percent).

[3] Read more at the Fairfax County Department Housing and Community Development's website, https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/housing/.

[4] "One-Stop Employment Resource Center Services," Fairfax County Department of Family Services – Employment and Training, accessed November 2025, https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/familyservices/employment-and-training/services.

[5] "Qualtrics Security and Compliance," Qualtrics, accessed July 2025, https://www.qualtrics.com/platform/security/.

[6] "Why Stata," Stata, accessed July 2025, https://www.stata.com/.

About the Authors

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