FAIRFAX COUNTY
VIRGINIA

Fairfax County Panhandling Study

Survey and Interview Findings

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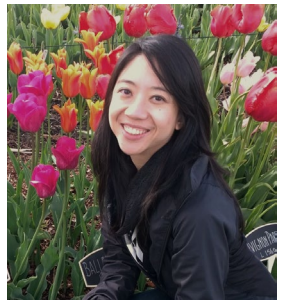

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Key Takeaways

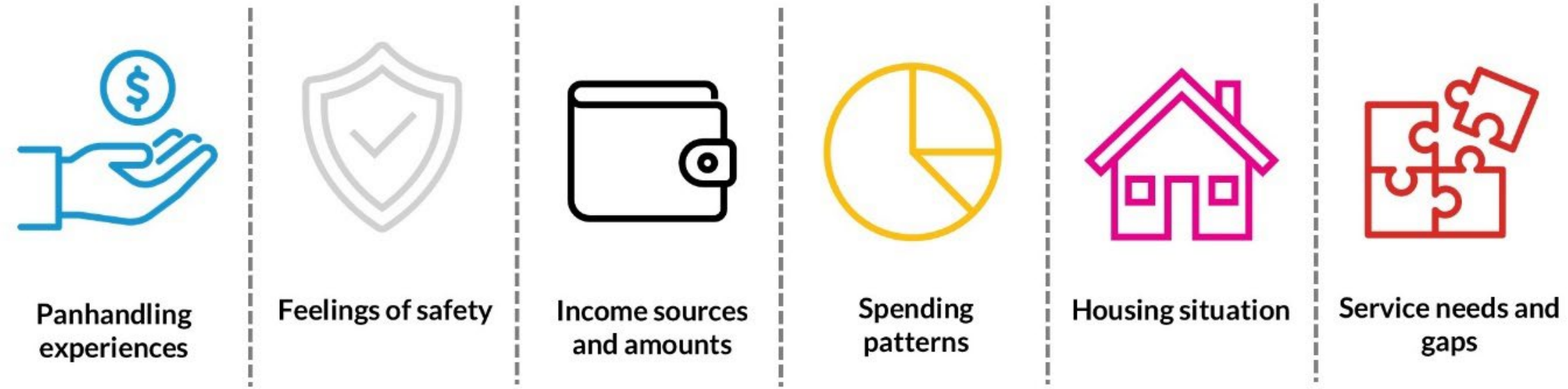
- People surveyed and interviewed who panhandle in Fairfax County revealed **complex challenges tied to health, housing insecurity, safety, and social stigma.**
- Many individuals who panhandle are **unaware of resources available** in Fairfax County and face barriers such as language, limited technology access, and transportation barriers.
- Findings indicate a **strong demand for resources** such as housing assistance, health care services, employment opportunities, and access to basic needs and supportive services.

Background

- In February 2025, the Fairfax County Department of Housing and Community Development engaged with Urban Institute researchers to conduct an exploratory study **on the needs and experiences of individuals who panhandle in the county.**
- Drawing on field surveys and semistructured, in-depth interviews with individuals who engage in panhandling, this 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.

Methods: Surveying and in-depth interviews

- Primary data sources were **field surveys and in-depth qualitative interviews** with people who panhandle in Fairfax County
- Between July – November 2025, Urban researchers completed **40 surveys** and **6 semistructured interviews** with individuals who engage in panhandling.
- Survey included 39 questions across six domains



METHODOLOGY

Surveying

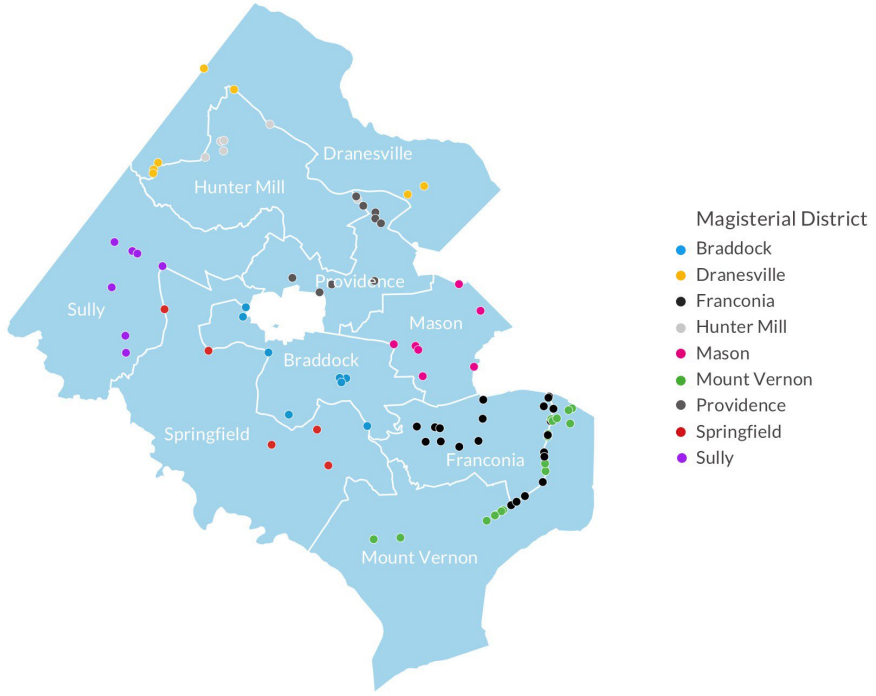
The research team prioritized panhandling "hot spots" identified by the Fairfax County Police Department and county constituents.

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.

Fairfax County Panhandling "Hot Spots"



Sources: 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 and Interview Findings

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 Source

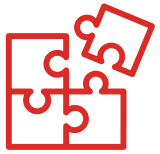
- Limited or no employment income was the most common reason for panhandling
- Most respondents reported annual incomes of under $10,000.
- Panhandling was the primary source of income for most respondents.
- Half earned less than $51 per day from panhandling, while one-third earned between $51 and $100, with wide variation across respondents.
- Panhandling income was primarily used for food, temporary shelter or housing, clothing, and hygiene needs.

Survey and Interview Findings



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.

Survey and Interview Findings

- **Perceptions of Panhandling**
  - 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.

*"**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**... 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

Recommendations

Study findings reveal critical gaps in access to shelter, housing, healthcare, employment, and information about available services.

Many individuals who panhandle are unaware of resources available in Fairfax County and face barriers such as language, limited technology access, and transportation barriers.

- **Expand street outreach,** particularly in-person engagement, to connect individuals with housing, healthcare, 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 healthcare,** including clearer multilingual information about low-income providers, Medicaid, and specialty care.

"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 voy 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."***

–Interview participant

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Recommendations

- **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.

*"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."*

–Interview participant

Thank you

Fairfax County Staff Response

The Department of Housing & Community Development (HCD) generally agree with the fundamental elements of the Urban Institute's recommendations.

While there is infrastructure to provide support; staff concede the challenges of awareness and navigating services.

This fiscal year, the County provided significant investments in street outreach contracts to local nonprofit organizations via new contracts. These new contacts include vendor changes in areas where over two-thirds of the survey responses originated. These services will complement and support the implementation of the recommendations.

HCD is hiring a new "Outreach & Overflow Specialist" position that will coordinate countywide street outreach, which will improve responsiveness to increased reports of unsheltered individuals as well as extreme weather.

Next Action Steps

Improve language access in outreach services and client documents.

Educate and connect individuals to shelter, housing, and other services.

Increase collaboration with the Community Services Board's PATH and Health Department's Homeless Healthcare Program teams to promote access to behavioral and physical healthcare.

Create more referral pathways to the Department of Public Works and Environmental Services' Operation Stream Shield and federal SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access, and Recovery (SOAR) program for eligible individuals.

Promote greater awareness of services and connections among service providers, houses of worship, local businesses, and other community members.