

Talking about panhandling

Nathan Hoedeman

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It was easy to pick the topic for this column after I read last month's edition of the City Journal because right there on the front page was a picture of a young man who tells his story of recovering from crack addiction and his life on the streets. Caught In The Crossfire was the title and it raised the many sides to the issue of panhandling.

After reading the article I knew I had to wade in the dialogue myself. See I said dialogue, not debate. To debate the issue of panhandling really gets us nowhere.

Recently our district officers arrested a local crack dealer and seized a sizable amount of money during the arrest. The money was mostly in the form of change. Where do you think this money comes from? Street level crack cocaine is easier and cheaper to obtain that it ever was and is certainly readily available to people on the street. The increase in demand for the drug and the increasing number of addicted prostitutes, panhandlers and homeless is no coincidence. The facts are there and should not be ignored or given a positive spin, as this helps no one. If we want the victimization to stop, then we must all take stock and ask ourselves what we are prepared to do to be a part of the solution.

I have heard so many stories around panhandling, some based in rhetoric, some based in fact. I have heard that some panhandlers can make up to \$300 a day and they live in nice apartments. This I find hard to believe. There may be some panhandler that has found a choice area to ask for money, but my experience shows most of them struggle to get by and would rather make a living by contributing to society.

Before becoming a police officer, I volunteered at a soup kitchen in Montréal and I got to know many homeless people. Each had their story on how they ended up on the street. Many suffered from various types of mental illness; others were so abused as children that they resorted to alcohol and drugs to overcome their pain and consequently became addicted. One woman's story left an impression on me because she used to show up every day and wouldn't speak with anyone. She was always writing mathematical formulas on pieces of scrap paper. I was told she used to be a math professor until she was afflicted by a mental illness and ended up on the street. Well that certainly helped me let go of any bias I may have had towards homeless people, or people who resort to panhandling to get by.

I know panhandlers present a nuisance, especially when they impede people, intimidate, coerce for money, or are openly intoxicated, aggressive or under the influence of drugs. Anyone who has had their business affected by the presence of panhandlers will tell you they drive away some customers and threaten their right to earn a living. Most citizens don't enjoy being asked for money on a constant basis and some people avoid downtown altogether because graffiti and the occasional aggressive panhandler is too much to bear and they feel unsafe. Others pay panhandlers out of a sense they are helping someone who appears less fortunate. Not many of these people stop to speak with the panhandler to ask what the money will be used for, or engage them to get to know their story. Would they be as quick to give money if they knew it was being used to ingest crack cocaine, various forms of alcohol based substances or even to sniff glue or paint thinner? Do people really think that panhandlers need the money for food? Are people aware of the community services that provide food, shelter and in some cases addiction counseling for those who request help? Giving money without reflecting on the overall impact does not address the issue as much as it perpetuates the cycle of dependency.

Under the Safe Streets Act, police only have the authority to intervene if a panhandler is soliciting near a bus stop, automatic bank teller machine, or if the soliciting is done in an aggressive, harassing or abusive manner. If the panhandler is intoxicated, then police have to option to intervene under the authority of the Liquor License Act as well. Police can really only address the panhandlers that most people are afraid of, but certainly can't address the issue of panhandling alone, as most panhandlers are not abusive or aggressive. As a community officer, I am interested in working with community members to find out what gaps in service are contributing to the problem. I am also interested in looking at what level of government is responsible for providing which service that might address the issue of affordable housing. I believe in creating awareness on the impact of panhandling and the homeless issue on police resources and the community.

The Neighbourhood Watch Program goes a long way in bringing people together to create awareness about what is going on. The program empowers people who at one time felt unsafe in their community. If you would like to know more about starting a Neighbourhood Watch Program in your area, please drop by the Somerset Community Police Center at 393 Somerset Street West between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. to speak with myself or a police volunteer.