



American panhandlers[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Panhandling
Panhandlers
Begging
Beggars
Public policy
Regulation
Information
United States

ABSTRACT

Urban panhandling and its regulation are global phenomena. Panhandling regulation, like other regulation, is likely to be effective only if it is informed about that which it regulates. We investigate whether American panhandling regulation is informed by examining what information about American panhandlers is available to inform it. Information is available about panhandlers' demographics, housing, income, and psychological health. Information is not available about the determinants of panhandling activities. Since those activities are the target of panhandling regulation, this suggests that American panhandling regulation is uninformed. And since American panhandlers are among the most studied in the world, it further suggests that panhandling regulation in most other countries may also be uninformed. Economic analysis of the potential (in)effectiveness of uninformed panhandling regulation suggests that existing panhandling regulation in US cities may not reduce public nuisance associated with panhandlers and may even increase it.

1. Introduction

Panhandlers are street people who solicit donations from passersby in public places.¹ Urban panhandling and its regulation are global phenomena. In countries from Australia to Qatar, China to Denmark, India to Ireland, to name but a few, governments (national or local) prohibit or restrict panhandling. Such regulation is interested in the welfare of the non-panhandling public. It seeks to minimize the nuisance that panhandlers impose on passersby and businesses.

Regulation is likely to be effective only if it is informed about that which it regulates. Pharmaceutical regulation, for example, is unlikely to be productive unless it is based on adequate information about the factors that affect drug efficacy. Environmental regulation would be enfeebled by ignorance about the causes of air pollution. And financial market regulation cannot achieve its goals without understanding the variables that influence financial-market stability. Panhandling regulation is no exception: to be reliably effective it must be informed, which requires information about the determinants of panhandling activities.

We investigate whether American panhandling regulation is informed by examining what information about American panhandlers is available to inform it. We consider the American case because it is uncommonly suited to illuminate the international one. American

panhandlers are among the most studied in the world. Hence, more information presumably is available to inform panhandling regulation in the United States than in most other countries. If American panhandling regulation nevertheless is uninformed, it therefore seems doubtful that panhandling regulation in most other countries could be well informed.

Our analysis proceeds in three steps. First, we examine what information about American panhandlers is available in published research. Information is available about panhandlers' demographics, housing, income, and psychological health. Second, we consider what information about American panhandlers is not available in published research. Information is not available about the determinants of panhandling activities. Since those activities are the target of panhandling regulation, this suggests that American panhandling regulation is uninformed about that which it regulates. And since American panhandlers are among the most studied in the world, it further suggests that panhandling regulation in most other countries may also be uninformed. Finally, we apply economic theory to analyze the potential (in)effectiveness of uninformed panhandling regulation, using American municipal regulations to illustrate. Our analysis suggests that existing panhandling regulation in US cities may not reduce public nuisance associated with panhandlers and may even increase it.

[☆] We thank the editor and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments. Leeson thanks Pichardo Maduro for stimulating thoughts.

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¹ "Street people" are the "disheveled, [and] apparently destitute" individuals who work and/or inhabit the streets in urban areas (O'Flaherty, 1996: 7).

Our paper contributes to understanding the global phenomena of urban panhandling and its regulation. Ours is the first study to examine the informational basis of existing panhandling regulation. It is the first study to economically analyze how the limits of that informational basis may constrain existing regulation's effectiveness. And it is the first study to bring together existing research findings on panhandling broadly and on American panhandlers in particular. Moreover, while panhandlers often are lumped together with the homeless population in general, we carefully distinguish between those groups with attention to dimensions on which they differ. Finally, our study develops several hypotheses to aid future research in investigating what currently is not well understood about panhandlers but must be understood for panhandling regulation to be well informed: the determinants of panhandling activities.

2. Literature review: information that is available about panhandlers

2.1. Method of review

We begin by reviewing published research that considers American panhandlers, discussed in Sections 2.2–2.5. Section 2.6 discusses research that considers panhandlers in other countries. Our literature-review method is a simplified version of that outlined in Wolfswinkel et al. (2013). We searched journal articles for the keywords “panhandle,” “panhandler,” “panhandling,” “beg,” “begging,” and “beggar.” After performing a preliminary review of abstracts to filter out papers unrelated to panhandling, full-text articles were read with particular attention to the characteristics reported on panhandlers. Finally, forward and backward citations were checked for additional relevant works to be incorporated.

Our review serves two purposes. First, it serves the conventional purpose of surveying relevant scholarly literature. Second, it serves the purpose unique to our study of evaluating what information about American panhandlers is available to inform American panhandling regulation.

2.2. Demographics and housing

Research that addresses panhandling in the United States commonly reports on panhandler demographics. It finds that most panhandlers are male. In Lee and Farrell's (2003: 310) sample of 372 panhandlers gleaned from the *National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients*, 81.6% of panhandlers are male. Sixty-four percent of panhandlers are male in Ferguson et al.'s (2015: 51) sample of 300 panhandlers identified from interviews with homeless youth in Austin, TX, Denver, CO, and Los Angeles, CA (see also, Taylor, 1999: 132, 141; see also, Tillotson & Lein, 2017: 87). And nearly 92% of panhandlers are male in Lankenau's (1999a: 189, 1999b: 316) smaller sample of 37 panhandlers interviewed in Washington, DC.

In the United States most panhandlers are African American and young-to-middle-aged. Lankenau (1999a: 189), for example, describes “the profile of a typical panhandler in [his] sample...as...a Black...man in his early 40s.” Duneier's (1999: 44) ethnographic study of street people in New York City finds panhandlers who are exclusively African-American males between their mid-thirties and late-fifties. And the average age of the panhandlers in Lee and Farrell's (2003: 310) national sample, approximately 60 of whom are minorities, is 38.4 years.

Research that addresses panhandling in the United States also commonly reports on panhandlers' housing status. It finds that most but not all panhandlers are homeless. Nearly 90% of the 305 panhandlers in Lei's (2013: 260) national sample are currently homeless. Similarly, 81% of the 74 Manhattan panhandlers surveyed by O'Flaherty (1996: 94) report having been homeless the night before. Only 3% of those panhandlers report having slept in a shelter the night before (despite it being March); the rest slept on trains, in stations, on park benches, or in

abandoned buildings. That comports with Kennedy and Fitzpatrick's (2001: 2006) observation that homeless panhandlers tend to “sleep rough.” Their observation is corroborated in Lee and Farrell's (2003: 310) data, according to which 71.1% of panhandlers slept outdoors in the past week. In contrast, just a quarter of other homeless people slept outdoors in the past week.

Further, compared to other homeless people in the United States, panhandlers have been living longer on the streets. Lee and Farrell (2003: 311) find that “panhandlers tend to have been homeless more often and for longer periods of time than those not engaging in” panhandling. Likewise, Snow and Anderson's (1993: 159) study of 168 homeless people in Austin, TX concludes that “the more time homeless people spent on the street...the greater the probability that they engaged in various forms of shadow work” such as panhandling. This information, together with information on panhandlers' income sources and psychological health considered below, suggests that American panhandlers compose a distinct subgroup within the broader American homeless population.

The size of that subgroup is modest. In national samples, estimates of American panhandlers' prevalence among the homeless range from 7.8% (Lei, 2013: 260) to “less than 20 percent” (Burt & Cohen, 1990: 24; see also, Zlotnick & Robertson, 1996: 149; Lee & Farrell, 2003: 310; Lee & Schreck, 2005: 1064). Estimates tend to be higher, however, in certain cities: 20.6% in Chicago, IL (Rossi, 1988: 97); 23.1% in Los Angeles, CA (Conroy, 2001: 302; Schoeni & Koegel, 1998: 299); 13.4% in Pittsburgh, PA (Garibaldi et al., 2005: 728); 22.8% in Detroit, MI; 30.4% in Philadelphia, PA; and 24.5% in Tucson, AZ (Snow et al., 1996: 90).

2.3. Revenue and income sources

Research that addresses panhandling in the United States furnishes a sense of panhandling revenue and identifies panhandlers' sources of income. Unlike panhandler race or gender, panhandling revenue is hard to measure. Unless panhandling receipts are observed—a rare occurrence—researchers must rely on figures that panhandlers report. The figures presented below should be considered with that in mind. Still, they suggest that panhandling revenue is low, generally yielding earnings that are below the poverty line.

In a sample of Los Angeles, CA homeless people interviewed by Schoeni and Koegel (1998: 299) that contain more than 300 panhandlers, mean panhandling revenue earned in the past 30 days is \$86. Lee and Farrell (2003: 311) find that a “panhandler's monthly income from all sources averages \$220,” but an unspecified part of that income is not from panhandling. The Los Angeles, CA “Bridge People” (so-named because they camp under a freeway bridge) interviewed by Underwood (1993: 125, 146, 147, 191) report earning on various occasions: \$7 jointly between two of them; \$2 or \$3 in two hours; \$15 in 2.5 h; and \$4.50 in 2.5 h. These figures suggest that panhandling revenue varies considerably for the same panhandlers, hour-to-hour and day-to-day. That suggestion is corroborated in O'Flaherty's (1996: 86) data, which reveal still larger variance in daily panhandling revenue. The median Manhattan panhandler reports earning \$32.50 on his best day and \$2.50 on his worst day in the previous week.

The literature contains some higher panhandling revenues. Among the dozen panhandlers in New Haven, CT interviewed by Goldstein (1993: 314–315), several report making between \$20 and \$50 per five-hour day—the highest earner claiming to collect more than \$300 a week; the lowest two earners, less than \$50 a week.² And in a rare study that observes panhandling receipts, Whyte (1988) finds that blind panhandlers in New York City earn approximately \$18 an hour, or \$100–150 per day. Such revenues, however, are exceptional.³

² Goldstein's (1993: 317) panhandlers solicited four days a week on average.

³ Ellickson (1996) suggests that higher panhandling revenues are common. Our review of the literature does not support that suggestion.

Panhandling revenues are not American panhandlers' only source of income. Other income sources include alternative kinds of "shadow work": economic activities such as scavenging, selling blood plasma, and theft which, like panhandling, are not traditionally seen as work (Snow et al., 1996: 92). Research finds that American panhandlers are more likely to engage in such work than the homeless in general. In Lee and Farrell's (2003: 310) national sample, 33.7% of panhandlers received income from shadow work in the previous month, compared to just 10.1% of the non-panhandling homeless. Further, American panhandlers are less likely to engage in traditional work than the homeless in general. In a study of young homeless people in Los Angeles, CA, Austin, TX, Denver, CO, New Orleans, LA, and St. Louis, MO, Ferguson et al. (2012: 393–394) find that "those who reported earning an income from panhandling were over 2 times more likely to be unemployed."

Gifts from family and friends provide another source of income for some American panhandlers. Among street people on Los Angeles' Skid Row, traditional work and gifts from family or friends are the most common sources of income, followed by panhandling (Schoeni & Koegel, 1998: 299). Government assistance is also available, but few American panhandlers take advantage of it. Lee and Farrell (2003: 310) find that 26.7% of panhandlers received government benefits in the past month, compared to 48.7% of the non-panhandling homeless. This difference may be related to panhandlers' lesser reliance on shelters and indicates another way in which panhandlers differ from the homeless in general.

2.4. Substance abuse

Studies of American panhandlers often contain individuals who use alcohol or drugs. Relatively little work, however, estimates substance-abuse prevalence among panhandlers specifically. A large body of work, in contrast, estimates substance-abuse prevalence among the American homeless in general. Substance-abuse prevalence is deceptively difficult to explore: What substances, for example, should be considered, and what constitutes "abuse" or "disorder"? Different researchers who have examined substance-abuse prevalence among the American homeless have seen fit to answer such questions in different ways. The result is a diverse range of findings.

Levitt et al.'s (2009: 980) study of 1093 homeless people in New York City, Robertson et al.'s (1997: 223) interviews with 564 homeless people in Alameda County, CA, and Koegel et al.'s (1999: 313) sample of 1524 homeless people in Los Angeles, CA find that between approximately 65 and 70% of the homeless have abused substances in their lifetimes. Lebrun-Harris et al. (2013: 1004) consider a national sample of 618 homeless health-center patients, according to which 12.1% have a "high risk of alcohol dependence"; 15% have a "high risk of drug dependence"; 14.3% have ever injected a drug; 31.4% have been treated for alcohol or drug use in the past year; and 40.3% have engaged in binge drinking in the past year. In Baggett et al.'s (2010: 1328) study of 966 homeless people drawn from 79 clinic sites that serve the homeless nationwide, in the past year, 25.1% used illicit drugs only; 9% had "problem alcohol use" only; and 30.7% used illicit drugs and had "problem alcohol use." Finally, Kushel et al.'s (2003: 2494) study of 1952 homeless people in San Francisco, CA finds that 24.2% report having problematic alcohol use in the past year, while 59.7% report having used illicit drugs during that period.

Amidst this sea of substance-abuse prevalence estimates, there is something approaching a constant. Substance abuse—however measured—is more prevalent among the homeless than in the US population as a whole (see, for instance, Baumohl & Huebner, 1991: 838; Fischer & Breakey, 1991: 1118). In the US as a whole, an estimated 5.5% of the population suffered from a "drug or alcohol disorder" in the past year: 2.1% from an alcohol disorder and 3.3% from a drug disorder (Ritchie, Roser, 2018a). Substance disorders thus seem to be significantly more prevalent among homeless Americans than among Americans in general.

And what about American panhandlers specifically? It is tempting to reason that since the typical panhandler is homeless, whatever the (relatively high) rate of substance abuse among the homeless may be, it applies to panhandlers as well. That reasoning, however, is dangerous. For while as Sections 2.2 and 2.3 reviewed, we know that panhandlers typically are homeless, we also know that in several important respects panhandlers are not the "typical homeless."

Fortunately, two studies of the American homeless consider panhandlers and non-panhandlers separately. Those studies furnish direct evidence on the prevalence of substance abuse among American panhandlers. Zlotnick and Robertson (1996) survey a nationwide probability sample of 564 homeless adults, 82 of whom panhandle. On the basis of respondents' replies to Diagnostic Interview Schedule questions about their substance use and mental health in the past 12 months, Zlotnick and Robertson (1996: 148) assign respondents to "four mutually exclusive current diagnostic groups: major mental disorders only (schizophrenia or major affective disorders), substance use disorders only (alcohol or other drug use disorders), dual disorders (both major mental and substance use disorders) and no current disorder." In their sample, 37.8% of American panhandlers have substance disorders only, compared to 34.9% of the non-panhandling homeless. And 17.1% of American panhandlers have both substance and mental disorders, compared to 8.5% of the non-panhandling homeless (below we consider results for mental illness alone).

Lee and Farrell's (2003: 307, 310) study of the *National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients*, which contains 2876 American homeless people, 372 of whom panhandle, also presents data on the prevalence of substance abuse in those populations separately. Lee and Farrell record the percentage of each group that had "alcohol problems" in the past month based on "indicators [that] include frequency and volume of consumption, amount spent on alcohol, adverse effects (craving, seizures, etc.), and importance and recency of treatment." Based on similar indicators, they additionally record the percentage of each group that had "drug problems" in the past month (Lee & Farrell, 2003: 310). Lee and Farrell find that 61% of American panhandlers experienced alcohol problems, compared to 34% of the non-panhandling homeless. And 37.8% of American panhandlers experienced drug problems, compared to 24.3% of the non-panhandling homeless.

Directly comparing Lee and Farrell's results to those of Zlotnick and Robertson (1996) is problematic since, typical of the literature that considers substance abuse among the homeless, their studies measure substance abuse in different ways. In qualitative terms, however, they paint a similar picture. Substance abuse is more prevalent among American panhandlers than among the American homeless in general. And substance abuse is more prevalent among the American homeless in general than among Americans in general.

2.5. Mental illness

As in the case of substance abuse, relatively little work estimates mental-illness prevalence among panhandlers specifically. A large body of work, however, estimates mental-illness prevalence among the American homeless in general. Fazel et al.'s (2008: 1675) meta-analysis of ten studies that consider mental illness among the homeless in Western countries relays prevalence estimates for "psychosis" in the past six months that range from 3 to 30%. Lehman and Cordray's (1993: 370) meta-analysis of 24 studies of mental illness among the homeless reports a weighted average prevalence of "any mental health problem" of 47%. In Koegel et al.'s (1999: 311) sample of homeless people in Los Angeles, CA, 5% suffered from schizophrenia in the past six months, 16% suffered from major depression, and 4% suffered from mania (7%, 22%, and 6% in their lifetimes, respectively). In Haugland et al.'s (1997: 507) interviews with 201 homeless people in Westchester County, NY, 21.4% are mentally ill. Nearly half the sample in Baggett et al.'s (2010: 1328) study, considered above, has been treated for mental illness. And in

Edens et al.'s (2011: 386) national sample of 714 homeless people, 76.2% report having mental health problems.

Estimates of mental-illness prevalence among homeless Americans thus vary substantially. As with substance abuse, however, there is consensus qualitatively: mental health problems are more prevalent among the homeless than in the general population. According to Ritchie, Roser (2018b), in the US as a whole, approximately 6% of people suffer from anxiety disorders, 5.2% suffer from depression, 0.8% suffer from bipolar disorder, and 0.3% suffer from schizophrenia. Regardless of how one defines mental illness, it thus seems that such illness affects the homeless at a significantly higher rate.

The same two studies that consider substance-abuse prevalence among the panhandling and non-panhandling homeless separately also consider mental-illness prevalence in those groups separately. Zlotnick and Robertson (1996: 150) find that 37.8% of American panhandlers have no current substance or mental disorder, compared to 48.8% of the non-panhandling homeless; 7.3% of panhandlers have mental disorders only, compared to 7.9% of the non-panhandling homeless; and 17.1% of panhandlers have both disorders, compared to 8.5% of the non-panhandling homeless. Approximately 62% of American panhandlers and 51% of the non-panhandling homeless thus have a substance or mental health disorder. To put those figures in context, according to Ritchie, Roser (2018b), approximately 22% of the US population in general has a substance or mental health disorder.

Lee and Farrell (2003: 310) find that 50.2% of American panhandlers experienced mental health problems in the past month, compared to 37.2% of the non-panhandling homeless, where “mental health problems” are based on “indicators [that] include types of symptoms (depression, anxiety, hallucinations, suicidal thoughts, etc.) and types and recency of treatment.” Directly comparing Lee and Farrell's results to those of Zlotnick and Robertson (1996) is again difficult, but both studies' results suggest the same ordering. Mental illness is more prevalent among American panhandlers than among the American homeless in general. And mental illness is more prevalent among the American homeless in general than among Americans in general.

2.6. Discussion

Existing research informs about American panhandlers' demographics, housing, income, and psychological health. “[T]he modern street beggar is generally representative in age and ethnicity of the general homeless population” (Stark, 1992: 342), but he is not representative of that population in terms of reliance on shelters, street-living duration, or economic activity. Further, while substance and mental disorders are prevalent among both panhandlers and the homeless population in general, they are especially prevalent among panhandlers.

Existing research does not inform, however, about the determinants of panhandling activities. Specific factors that influence the choice of whether to panhandle, specific factors that influence the choice of how to panhandle, and data on panhandler responsiveness to changes in those factors are conspicuously absent in the research reviewed above. Such information therefore presumably is unavailable to inform American panhandling regulation. This suggests that American panhandling regulation is uninformed about that which it regulates, since that which it regulates is whether and how one may panhandle. Further, since American panhandlers are among the most studied in the world, uninformed panhandling regulation in the United States suggests that panhandling regulation in most other countries may also be uninformed.

Indeed, studies of panhandlers in other countries typically contain—and lack—the same kinds of information about panhandlers as studies of panhandlers in the United States. International studies of panhandlers thus inform about panhandler demographics (Butovskaya et al., 2000; Burke, 2000; Lynch, 2005; Ogunkan & Fawole, 2009; Namwata et al., 2012; Matei et al., 2013; Rugoho & Siziba, 2014; Frederick et al., 2016; Malarvizhi & Geetha, 2016; Mansour, 2017); panhandler income (Adriaenssens & Hendrickx, 2011; Bose & Hwang,

2002; Djuve et al., 2015; Ebeling et al., 2017; Frederick et al., 2016; Malarvizhi & Geetha, 2016; Mansour, 2017; Shara et al., 2020); panhandler housing (Gloria & Samuel, 2012; Lynch, 2005; Malarvizhi & Geetha, 2016; Namwata et al., 2012); and panhandler psychological health (DeBeck et al., 2011; Lynch, 2005; Namwata et al., 2012; Por- emski et al., 2015).

While it is hazardous to summarize across the diversity of countries these studies consider, very broadly speaking, panhandlers internationally resemble their American counterparts in that they tend to be male, have low incomes and earn modest wages panhandling, typically are homeless, and exhibit comparatively high rates of substance and mental disorders. Crucially, however, like studies of American panhandlers, studies of panhandlers in other countries generally do not inform about the determinants of panhandling activities, which are the activities that panhandling regulation targets.⁴ It therefore seems doubtful that panhandling regulation in most other countries could be much better informed than it is in the United States.

3. Information that is unavailable about panhandlers: determinants of panhandling activities

This section examines in detail the information about American panhandlers that is unavailable in existing research, hence unavailable to inform existing American panhandling regulation: information about the determinants of panhandling activities. To characterize American panhandling regulation as uninformed, however, is not to say that its informational basis is zero. While that basis does not include information directly relevant for regulating panhandling effectively, it does include other information, such as panhandler income sources, that could be used to develop hypotheses for investigating the determinants of panhandling activities. Information about American panhandlers that is available thus may be serviceable indirectly for regulating panhandling effectively.

The analysis below therefore performs several tasks. First, it analyzes the two categories of choice that reflect panhandling activities: the choice of whether to panhandle, which Section 3.2 considers, and the choice of how to panhandle, which Section 3.3 considers. Second, we use what is known about American panhandlers from existing research to develop hypotheses that future research could use to investigate what is not known but is required for panhandling regulation to be well informed: the determinants of panhandling activities. Finally, Section 4 analyzes the potential (in)effectiveness of existing panhandling regulation given its limited informational basis.

3.1. Method of analysis

The theoretical approach we apply to develop hypotheses about the determinants of panhandling activities in Sections 3.2 and 3.3 and to analyze the potential (in)effectiveness of existing panhandling regulation in Section 4 is that of economics (see Becker, 1976). It treats panhandling decisions as work decisions, made with the goal of earning income and rationally responsive to costs and benefits. Until such time as information about the determinants of panhandling activities is forthcoming, it is not possible to empirically examine the utility of the economic approach—or any other theoretical approach—to panhandling. The economic approach, however, offers a fruitful starting point for theorizing panhandler behavior. Panhandling is nothing if not a form of work aimed at earning income. And while the high prevalence of substance and mental disorders among American panhandlers may give pause to treating them as rationally responsive to incentives, absent evidence to the contrary, it is reasonable to analyze panhandler choice in

⁴ A few studies of panhandlers in other countries, however, consider panhandlers' spatial distribution (Khan, 2018; Maiwada et al., 2019; Ogunkan & Jelili, 2013; Shara et al., 2020).

the same way that the choices of other people are analyzed. After all, many people who do not panhandle are also, for example, addicted to substances and nevertheless behave as economic theory predicts (see, for instance, Becker et al., 1994; Grossman & Chaloupka, 1998; Grossman et al., 1998). Moreover, responding rationally to incentives is as important to panhandler survival as it is to the survival of anyone else (see Alchian, 1950)—if not more so given panhandlers' precarious proximity to subsistence.

3.2. The choice of whether to panhandle

The decision to panhandle cannot be easy. On nearly every dimension, panhandling is unpleasant work. It is widely considered degrading. It can lead to extreme social stigma (Lankenau, 1999a, 1999b). And according to the National Opinion Center's *General Social Survey*, it has the lowest prestige score of all work—substantially lower than even drug-dealing and prostitution (Smith, 2005: 554).

Panhandling is also dangerous work. The street community can be cooperative but also can be predatory (see, for instance, Cavender et al., 1993: 58). Forty-five percent of the non-panhandling American homeless in Lee and Farrell's (2003: 310) national sample report being "victimized while homeless" (see also, Simons et al., 1989: 492; Padgett & Struening, 1992: 528; Fitzpatrick et al., 1993: 360), and American "homeless people who engage in...panhandling are at a" still "greater risk of victimization" (Lee & Schreck, 2005: 1070; see also, Whitbeck & Simons, 1993: 146). In Lee and Farrell's (2003: 310) data, panhandlers' risk of victimization is 20 percentage points greater than that of the non-panhandling homeless. Further, panhandlers may be subject to police harassment or arrest (see, for instance, Amster, 2003; Lankenau's, 1999b; NLCHP, 2017).

Unlike many other kinds of degrading or dangerous work, panhandling, as reviewed in Section 2, does not pay well. Indeed, American panhandlers' income is "well below" that of even the homeless in general (Lee & Farrell, 2003: 311). On the positive side of the ledger, panhandlers can control their own schedules, have no bosses to satisfy, and may take leisure when and in whatever quantities suit them. Still, no one dreams of one day becoming a panhandler. While some street people may not mind panhandling—the comparatively high-earning panhandlers who Goldstein (1993: 303) interviews, for instance, claim to be uninterested in minimum-wage work—that seems unlikely to be the case in general.

Why, then, do perhaps 10 to 20 percent of American street people panhandle? Stated differently, what are the determinants of a street person's decision to panhandle? As discussed above, that information is not available in existing research. Some pieces of information contained in existing research, however, offer clues from which hypotheses may be developed and ultimately, we hope, tested.

One such piece of information is highlighted by the experiences of an American panhandler named Stu, interviewed by Lankenau (1999b: 308). Those experiences reveal that some street people do not have access to facilities necessary to maintain basic hygiene, such as a place to clean oneself and one's clothes. Most traditional employments require a clean person and wardrobe. The cost of satisfying such requirements for street people like Stu is therefore high and, if it is high enough, may exceed the benefit of regularly engaging in traditional work. Street people in Stu's position thus may choose to engage in economic activities that do not impose clean-person and wardrobe requirements: shadow work, such as panhandling.

A second piece of useful information available in existing research is Calsyn and Morse's (1991: 162) finding that educational attainment is "inversely related to the length of time since first homeless" (see also, Calsyn & Rodes, 1994: 276). American panhandlers, recall from Section 2, tend to have been homeless longer (and more often) than the homeless in general, and more than a third of the panhandlers in Lee and Farrell's (2003: 310) national sample did not graduate high school (see also, Tillotson & Lein, 2017: 90). That likely affects the decision to

panhandle because education affects one's human capital—her stock of knowledge and skills—which in turn affects her expected returns from alternative forms of work. Given American panhandlers' unusually low levels of formal education, they have unusually low human capital relevant for traditional employment. Economic activities that are not human capital intensive, such as panhandling and other kinds of shadow work, therefore may be their least-bad employment option.

Substance abuse and mental illness, considered in Section 2, as well as physical disability, also may negatively affect some American street persons' human capital, making them more likely to panhandle (Smith, 2005). As one panhandler queried rhetorically, "who's going to hire a thirty-two-year-old alcoholic?" (Stark, 1992: 350). In the words of a Los Angeles, CA "bridge person": "I'm not economically stable and so I HAVE TO DO SOMETHING! If I want to have a hamburger on the table tonight" (Underwood, 1993: 54).

But that something need not be panhandling, which is only one of several shadow employments that street people may engage in, none of which are human capital intensive. What, then, determines whether a street person panhandles or engages in alternative shadow employments instead? That information is unavailable in existing research. Nevertheless, existing research contains the germ of a testable hypothesis that may be helpful for discovering it.

According to Snow et al. (1996: 92), when in search of cash, many American street people's first choice is selling blood plasma, followed second by panhandling. For the typical street person, plasma selling almost surely yields more revenue per unit of time than panhandling. Plasma, however, can be sold only periodically. When both options are available, therefore, street people may sell plasma, and when plasma selling is not possible they panhandle.

Or consider Schoeni and Koegel's (1998: 299) finding from Section 2, according to which money from family and friends contributes more than panhandling to the income of street people in Los Angeles, CA. That may reflect the fact that seeking money from family and friends is preferred to panhandling—and even to selling plasma—since the former likely yields still higher revenue per unit of time. Family and friends, however, are not bottomless wells. Hence, similar to the constraints that a street person faces in continuously selling plasma, he also may be constrained in his ability to continuously draw from family and friends. When a street person can draw from family and friends, he therefore does so, and when he cannot, he turns to his next-best option, which at some point may be panhandling. Scavenging, in contrast, which may be less remunerative than panhandling, and theft, which may be riskier, are reserved for times when panhandling is not viable.

Understanding the determinants of the decision to panhandle, of course, requires information not only about which specific factors influence the returns of panhandling relative to traditional and alternative kinds of shadow work but also about the magnitudes of decisionmakers' responses to changes in those factors. In the sole empirical analysis that informs about the decision to panhandle in the United States, Dordick et al. (2018) find that the number of panhandlers in downtown Manhattan did not significantly increase following a tourist influx. While that influx presumably did not increase the return of panhandling relative to alternative kinds of shadow work such as scavenging and theft (more passersby available to solicit also means more trash left by passersby and more passerby pockets available for picking), it presumably did increase the return of panhandling relative to traditional work. If so, the small change in the number of panhandlers may suggest that the decision to panhandle is not very responsive to changes in the return of panhandling relative to traditional work.

Another piece of information available in existing research that is useful for hypothesizing determinants of an American street person's decision to panhandle is that panhandling, as discussed above, is particularly dangerous work (Lee & Schreck, 2005: 1070; Whitbeck & Simons, 1993: 146; Lee & Farrell, 2003: 310). The danger it presents may depend on gender, since females tend to be more frequent targets of harassment and may also be more attractive targets of theft or assault

than males. If so, it is relatively more costly for females to panhandle, which may contribute to the predominance of male panhandlers. [Pasaro \(1996: 2–3, 85–89\)](#), moreover, contends that it is more socially acceptable for women to rely on institutionalized assistance than it is for men to do so. In that case, homeless females have a larger income-source opportunity set than homeless males do, also potentially resulting in fewer females choosing to panhandle.

3.3. The choice of how to panhandle

It is easy to construe panhandling simply as “begging.” That, however, belies the nuanced and more important specific solicitation activities in which panhandlers engage. As anyone who frequently encounters panhandlers is aware, there is not one mode of panhandling but many. Some panhandlers solicit passersby passively—standing, sitting, or lying on the ground in public view awaiting donations. Other panhandlers solicit more actively, with cardboard signs or by addressing passersby vocally. Still other panhandlers solicit with great activeness: performing for passersby, giving away token items in hope of a contribution, or following passersby as they move down the street.

Each of those panhandling activities, moreover, exhibits micro-varieties. Vocal solicitations, for example, are sometimes made aggressively, other times as impassioned pleas for help, and still other times with humor: “Need money for beer.” Sign-made solicitations can be word-based, picture-based, require passersby to come close to see, or be legible from far away. A sign-using panhandler whom one of us encountered in New York City had a “rolodex” of different signs through which he flipped periodically. Performance types (song, instrumental, dance) and “gifts” (issues, newspapers) given by panhandlers vary. Micro-varieties are apparent even among panhandlers who merely sit or lie silently on the ground but nevertheless exhibit a range of countenances, from helpless to menacing.

Of the many solicitation activities that are possible, what determines which solicitation activity a panhandler chooses to engage in? These activities are at the heart of panhandling. And while some research has taken notice of the tremendous creativity and entrepreneurship they display (see, for instance, [Stark, 1992: 342](#); [Lankenau, 1999a, 1999b](#)), no research investigates the factors that drive their variation or the responsiveness of panhandlers to changes in those factors.⁵

Nor has research systematically investigated such questions in the context of American panhandler locational choice. In major US cities, panhandlers are found in many public spaces. Across those spaces, however, panhandlers' distribution varies widely. One potential determinant of panhandler locational choice is passerby traffic. More passersby mean more panhandling opportunities. If panhandlers respond rationally to incentives, spaces that are trafficked by more passersby thus will attract more panhandlers. In the sole empirical analysis that informs about panhandler locational choice in the United States, [Dordick et al. \(2018\)](#) find that panhandlers in downtown Manhattan moved to locations where passerby traffic increased following an influx of tourists.

Another potential determinant of panhandler locational choice is the receptiveness of passersby to solicitation. Most passersby see panhandlers as a “minor annoyance” ([Skogan, 1990: 21](#)) and attach to them “negative stereotypes...such as being dangerous, dirty, diseased, and mentally ill” ([Lankenau, 1999a: 185](#); see also, [Liebow, 1993](#); [Wagner, 1993: 3](#)). Avoidance of panhandlers is therefore common. Some passersby, however, are openly hostile to panhandlers. [Lankenau \(1999b: 301–305\)](#), for example, documents verbal and physical harassment of panhandlers in Washington, DC. Other passersby, in contrast, are highly receptive to panhandler solicitation, even becoming regular donors to certain panhandlers they encounter often. [Goldstein \(1993: 324\)](#), for

⁵ On the variety of panhandling solicitation activities in southeastern Mexico, see [Fabrega \(1971\)](#), and in the Ecuadorian Andes, see [Swanson \(2007\)](#).

instance, documents panhandler “patrons” who give “significant amounts of money” and are “far more likely than other passersby to offer...clothing or food.” Such differences in passerby receptiveness to panhandling may vary spatially, which in turn may influence where panhandlers choose to solicit. Public spaces frequented by work commuters, for example, may facilitate exposure to regulars, leading such spaces to offer higher panhandling revenues and to attract more panhandlers. Spaces frequented by passersby on out-of-town business, most of whom will never return to those spaces again, may offer lower potential revenues and thus attract fewer panhandlers.

Race might also play a role in passerby receptiveness to panhandling and therefore influence panhandler locational choice. [Lankenau's \(1999b\)](#) panhandlers, for instance, report receiving larger contributions from passersby whose race differs from their own. As one African-American panhandler relates, “my own race...they don't give me nutin” ([Lankenau, 1999b: 300](#)). Conversely, according to a Caucasian panhandler, “Minorities give more money—to me they do” ([Lankenau, 1999b: 300](#)). Passerby race may vary spatially, leading passerby receptiveness to do so as well—public spaces typically traveled by Caucasian passersby possibly offering more promising returns to African-American panhandlers and vice versa.

The results of [Goldberg's \(1995: 84–85\)](#) study of panhandler-passerby interactions in Boston, MA imply that gender, and even relationship status, might affect passerby receptiveness to panhandling. Goldberg finds that single male passersby give more often to female panhandlers and that male passersby accompanied by women give less often to female panhandlers. If these passerby demographics vary spatially, they too could influence panhandlers' locational distribution. The same is true of differences in passerby religiosity. A survey that [Dhanani and Donley \(2011: 58\)](#) administer, however, finds no clear relationship between religiosity and willingness to give to the homeless. Another potential determinant of panhandler locational choice is the number of other panhandlers at a location and thus its degree of panhandling competition. Still other possible determinants of locational choice include police presence and the availability of alcohol or drugs, which [Stark \(1992: 343\)](#) suggests influence where panhandlers choose to solicit.

A final aspect of panhandling activity about which little is known is panhandler “pricing.” Panhandlers rely on different pricing schemes. [Stark \(1992: 344–346\)](#) identifies two: “frame” pricing, whereby a panhandler requests money for a specific ostensible purpose such as gas, bus fare or food, and “pique” pricing ([Santos et al., 1994: 756](#)), whereby a panhandler requests an atypical sum such as 17 cents instead of a quarter. A third panhandler pricing scheme—perhaps the most common—is “pay-what-you-want” pricing, whereby a panhandler invites passersby to give whatever they would like, either explicitly, “Can you spare some change?” or implicitly, such as when a panhandler shakes a cup and says nothing at all. What are the determinants of how panhandlers choose to price their solicitations? That question, too, awaits study.

4. Potential pitfalls of uninformed panhandling regulation

To achieve a goal from ignorance requires achieving it by chance. Uninformed regulation therefore is unlikely to be effective. As [Sections 2 and 3](#) considered, information about the determinants of panhandling activities is unavailable to inform panhandling regulation. Since those are the activities that such regulation targets, this suggests that panhandling regulation is uninformed. It thus seems unlikely that American panhandling regulation achieves its goal of minimizing public nuisance associated with panhandlers.

The effect of panhandling regulation on public nuisance, in the United States or elsewhere, has not been analyzed empirically. The data required for such analysis—like information about the determinants of panhandling activities—is unavailable. Below we therefore use economic theory to examine the potential (in)effectiveness of American

panhandling regulation. Section 4.1 describes municipal panhandling regulation in the United States. Section 4.2 analyzes that regulation economically in light of its limited informational basis.

4.1. Municipal panhandling regulation in the United States

Panhandling regulation in the United States overwhelming is created and applied at the municipal level.⁶ An estimated 83% of US cities regulate panhandling (NLCHP, 2019). Such regulations seek to reduce public nuisance associated with panhandlers. Some cities totally ban panhandling, while others ban only “aggressive” panhandling, the definition of which varies by code. Thirty-eight percent of US cities prohibit some form of panhandling citywide, and 65% prohibit it in designated public places (NLCHP, 2019: 44–45). Many municipal codes in the United States also include interventions that regulate panhandling indirectly. An estimated 55% of US cities, for example, have at least one law that prohibits sitting and/or lying down in public spaces (NLCHP, 2019: 13).

Legal penalties for violating panhandling regulations include fines, community service, and incarceration. Most street people do not have the resources to pay fines, and enforcing sentences of community service can be difficult. In practice, street people arrested and prosecuted for panhandling infractions thus tend to receive brief jail sentences. A single violation does not ordinarily result in arrest. More often, panhandlers are “shooed away” by authorities, who may also dispense to them a citation. The more citations a panhandler receives, the more likely his arrest. As former Los Angeles Police Chief William Bratton described it, “You arrest them, prosecute them. Put them in jail. And if they do it again, you arrest them, prosecute them, and put them in jail. It’s that simple” (Jeffreys, 2018: 67–68). The practice of “temporarily cycling people through local jails or citing them with fines that they cannot afford” (NLCHP, 2017: 42) potentially has longer-term negative consequences for panhandlers than being briefly deprived of their liberty. Jail time, failure to pay fines, or failure to appear in court may result in a legal record that could further increase the difficulty of securing traditional employment.

4.2. Analyzing the potential (in)effectiveness of existing panhandling regulation

Our analysis of the potential (in)effectiveness of existing panhandling regulation examines each type of US municipal regulation described above: total bans on panhandling; aggressive-panhandling bans; panhandling locational restrictions; and bans on sitting/lying in public spaces.

First, consider total bans on panhandling. Such a ban increases the cost or, what is the same, reduces the return of panhandling relative to alternative employments. It thus induces some panhandlers to substitute hours spent in alternative employment for hours spent panhandling. Whether that results in less or more public nuisance, however, depends on the particular alternative employments into which panhandlers substitute, which is unknown.

If street people who cease to panhandle substitute into traditional work, a total ban on panhandling reduces public nuisance: activity that does not impose a public nuisance replaces activity that does. As Section 3 discussed, however, panhandlers face severe constraints in securing traditional work. It therefore is at least as likely that street people who cease to panhandle substitute into other kinds of shadow work instead. In that case, a total ban on panhandling may not reduce public nuisance

⁶ In earlier decades, however, such regulation tended to come from states (Smith, 2005). In 2015 a US Supreme Court decision relating to religious speech unexpectedly prompted federal courts across the country to begin revisiting municipal laws on panhandling, generating substantial controversy. See, Reed v. Town of Gilbert, 135 S.Ct. 2218, 576 U.S. ___ (2015).

and may even increase it. Unlike traditional work, shadow work alternatives to panhandling such as scavenging and theft also impose a public nuisance. Few members of the public are pleased by street people rummaging through trash bags and garbage bins for recyclables, and no one likes to have their property stolen, which is a much greater imposition than being solicited for donations. Sufficient panhandler substitution into these shadow employments therefore may exacerbate public nuisance. Information about such substitutions and their magnitudes, however, is unavailable to inform panhandling regulation. Existing total bans on panhandling thus may be ineffective or even counterproductive with respect to their goal.

Next, consider aggressive-panhandling bans. While the meaning of “aggressive” varies across codes, in each code it encompasses multiple solicitation activities—some of which may impose only a minor nuisance on the public and others of which impose a much larger one. In Lafayette, LA, for example, the law prohibits aggressive panhandling, defined as soliciting “‘money or anything of value’ within ‘an arm’s length’ of passersby without their consent” (NLCHP, 2019: 45). Soliciting a passerby from a stationary position as she goes by and following a passerby for two blocks to solicit her as she travels to her destination therefore are both considered aggressive and penalized equally under the code (provided that the solicitor is within arm’s length and has not requested the passerby’s permission to solicit her).

An aggressive-panhandling ban reduces the return of panhandling that has been defined as aggressive relative to panhandling that has not been so defined. It therefore induces some panhandlers to substitute permitted solicitation activities for proscribed ones. Among panhandlers who continue to engage in proscribed solicitation activities, however, an aggressive-panhandling ban also induces panhandler substitution between activities defined as aggressive. Following a passerby to solicit her, for example, consumes more time and requires more effort from a panhandler than soliciting her from a stationary position as she goes by. The former solicitation activity therefore is more costly to panhandlers than the latter. A panhandling regulation that treats both activities as aggressive adds to both an equal fixed cost: the legal penalty attendant to “aggressive” panhandling. It therefore reduces the cost of soliciting-by-following relative to stationary solicitation. That induces panhandlers who engage in proscribed solicitation activities to substitute solicitation-by-following, which imposes a large nuisance on passersby, for stationary solicitation, which imposes a small one. If this substitution is large relative to panhandler substitution into solicitation activities that are not defined as aggressive, the aggressive-panhandling ban may not reduce public nuisance and may even increase it. Information about such substitutions and their magnitudes, however, is unavailable to inform panhandling regulation. Existing aggressive-panhandling bans thus may be ineffective or even counterproductive with respect to their goal.

The same is true of panhandling locational restrictions. Such a restriction reduces the return of panhandling in designated public spaces relative to panhandling in non-designated public spaces. It thus induces panhandlers to substitute soliciting in the latter spaces for soliciting in the former ones. Whether locational substitution decreases or increases public nuisance, however, depends on how panhandling competition affects solicitation aggressiveness, which is unknown.

Consider two public spaces: one trafficked by more passersby, which has more panhandlers, and the other trafficked by fewer passersby, which has fewer panhandlers. Suppose panhandling in the former space is banned and that all panhandlers in the former space move to the latter space, where panhandling remains permitted. The number of panhandlers soliciting in the same space therefore rises, and the number of passersby available for them to solicit falls. Panhandlers thus face more competition for the attention of passersby. If competition has no effect on how aggressively panhandlers solicit, the locational restriction’s sole effect on public nuisance is to reduce it: panhandling continues with the same aggressiveness as before, but fewer passersby are solicited. It is equally plausible, however, that when panhandlers must compete more

vigorously for the attention of passersby, they solicit passersby more aggressively. In that case, the locational restriction trades the solicitation of more passersby less aggressively for the solicitation of fewer passersby more aggressively. If the increase in solicitation aggressiveness is large relative to the reduction in passersby solicited, a locational restriction therefore may not reduce public nuisance and may even increase it. Information about the effect of panhandling competition on panhandlers' solicitation activities, however, is unavailable to inform panhandling regulation. Existing locational restrictions on panhandling thus may be ineffective or even counterproductive with respect to their goal.

Finally, consider bans on sitting/lying in public spaces. Sitting/lying in public spaces is to some extent an input into all panhandling solicitation activities since all panhandlers are at some point likely to sit or lie down while at work. A ban on sitting/lying therefore increases the cost of panhandling generally, which reduces the quantity of panhandling. Some solicitation activities, however, rely less heavily on sitting/lying than others. Following passersby to solicit them, for example, relies minimally on sitting/lying, whereas soliciting passersby from a public bench relies maximally on sitting/lying. A sitting/lying ban therefore also reduces the relative cost of solicitation activities that rely less on sitting/lying. That induces panhandlers to substitute those solicitation activities for ones that rely more on sitting/lying. If solicitation activities that rely less on sitting/lying tend to be more aggressive, and if panhandler substitution into them is large relative to the general reduction in panhandling, a ban on sitting/lying in public spaces therefore may not reduce public nuisance and may even increase it. Information about such substitutions and their magnitudes, however, is unavailable to inform panhandling regulation. Existing bans on sitting/lying in public spaces, too, thus may be ineffective or even counterproductive with respect to their goal.

5. Conclusion

Our paper contributes to understanding the global phenomena of urban panhandling and its regulation. Panhandling regulation seeks to minimize public nuisance associated with panhandlers. Like other kinds of regulation, however, panhandling regulation is likely to be effective only if it is informed about that which it regulates. That requires information about the determinants of panhandling activities.

We investigated whether American panhandling regulation is informed by examining what information about American panhandlers is available to inform it. We found that information is available about panhandlers' demographics, housing, income, and psychological health but that information is not available about the determinants of panhandling activities. Since those are the activities that panhandling regulation targets, this suggests that American panhandling regulation is uninformed about that which it regulates. And since American panhandlers are among the most studied in the world, it further suggests that panhandling regulation in most other countries may also be uninformed.

The effect of panhandling regulation on public nuisance in the United States or elsewhere has not been analyzed empirically. The data required for such analysis—like information about the determinants of panhandling activities—is unavailable. We therefore used economic theory to analyze the potential (in)effectiveness of existing panhandling regulation given that regulation's limited informational basis. Our analysis suggests that existing panhandling regulation in US cities may not reduce public nuisance associated with panhandlers and may even increase it.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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