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Signs of Humanity: A Qualitative Exploration of Panhandling in Philadelphia

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PH Track Abstract

People who participate in panhandling are those who ask for financial or other assistance on the street. In Philadelphia, it is known that a large portion of people who panhandle also experience housing insecurity or other hardship. Panhandlers are a very visible fraction of a city's homeless population and their experiences are of particular interest because their cardboard signs can give insight into common hardships such as housing and food insecurity and substance abuse disorders. While panhandlers in Philadelphia have been surveyed in the past, there is not recent literature on their lived experiences and perspectives and information was not collected and analyzed in a qualitative manner. The purpose of this study was to shed light on the experiences and needs of those who panhandle in Philadelphia. This was a qualitative study that utilized open-ended and freelisting questions. The results of the open ended questions will be analyzed via thematic coding. This approach will highlight major themes in responses to allow summary and organization of the major findings. Analysis of the freelisting question specifically will give information about the ways that those who participate in panhandling spend the money they receive. Formal results are pending, but preliminary findings reveal appreciation of social interaction with passersby, explanations for IV drug use, and lack of family and social support among study participants. The final results will guide recommendations on initiatives benefiting Philadelphia's homeless population.