

BEING DOWNTOWN

~A PROJECT OF THE DOWNTOWN MANAGEMENT DISTRICT AND SEARCH HOMELESS SERVICES~

SECTION I. INTRODUCTION

Despite the economic challenges that have beset the rest of the nation, Houston is thriving and nowhere is that more obvious than in the downtown district. The expected manifestations of urban prosperity are apparent throughout--the kinetic energy of downtowners coursing through the tunnels stopping for just a moment of window shopping, visitors boarding the rail to take in an Astros game, set against the potential energy of the towering office buildings. Downtown Houston is an especially vibrant community that shines with public art works, performing arts centers, elegant touches of urban landscapes and community development policies and practices that are based on optimism and confidence. Within this prosperity walk a group of people who are not participants in it. Some come downtown to congregate, some to access social services or medical or mental health care and some come with hopes of convincing others to part with a few dollars to tide them over. It is a snapshot of this group of people, their motivation and activities associated with their presence downtown that is addressed by this report. Over the past 10 years, downtown leaders have committed to see and hear this group of people who are too often voiceless and whose presence sparks attributions and interpretations about them that distorts the reality of their lives.

The Downtown Management District (DMD) commissioned SEARCH Homeless Services to interview volunteers from this group of people about what brings them downtown. The intent of the study is to offer city leaders information that will enable them to understand these individuals who continue to struggle and whose means of support puts them in conflict with the community at large and often law enforcement. The information contained in this report is offered as data upon which relevant, existing public policy can be refined and new policies developed, as needed in the same compassionate, strategic manner that these leaders deployed to address the many challenges from disaster recovery or homelessness over the past 10 years. Like all good public policy, it will be informed by the words of those whom it seeks to effect.

SECTION II. PROCESS

Between February 5, 2013 and February 20, 2013, two outreach workers from SEARCH interviewed 30 individuals whom they encountered at the downtown locations within the perimeters of District 1, as noted in Chart 1 below. They interviewees were either panhandling or by their demeanor or appearance were suspected by the interviewers to be members of the target population for the study. They were approached, informed of the parameters of the study, assured of confidentiality and invited to participate in the study. A gift card to a local fast food restaurant was offered to participants. Consent was assumed by their participation. A copy of the interview form is found in Appendix 1.

• **TABLE 1: LOCATION OF INTERVIEWS**

	NUMBER	PERCENT
Dallas @ Travis	1	3.3%
Dallas @ Main	9	30.0%
Main @ McKinney	7	23.3%
Main @ Walker	4	13.3%
Main @ Lamar	6	20.0%
McKinney @ Travis	2	6.7%
McKinney @ Fannin	1	3.3%

Among the interviewees, three groups emerged:

1. People who are homeless
2. People who panhandle
3. People who congregate downtown who are neither homeless, nor panhandle

Nineteen of the 30 respondents indicated that they were homeless at the time of the interview (63.3%). As shown in Table 2, 13 of the 30 respondents (43.3%) reported that they used panhandling as at least one source of their income. Table 2 also shows the housing status of those who panhandle and those who do not.

Section IV: Profiles, provides greater detail about the three groups.

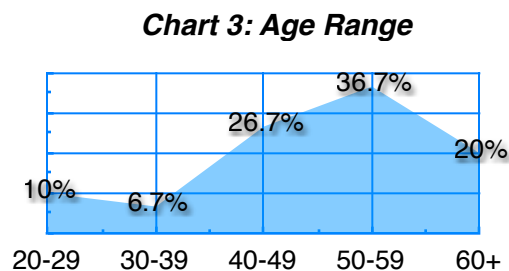
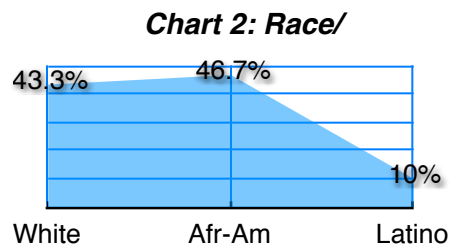
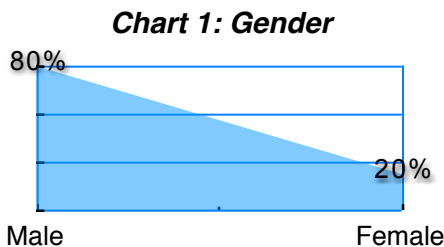
TABLE 2: HOUSING STATUS AND USE OF PANHANDLING

	HOUSED		HOMELESS		TOTAL	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Panhandle	4	36.4%	9	47.4%	13	43.3%
Do not Panhandle	7	63.6%	10	52.6%	17	56.7%
Total	11	100.0%	19	100.0%	30	100.0%

SECTION III. INTERVIEWEE CHARACTERISTICS

◆ *DEMOGRAPHICS*

The demographic profile of the respondents is consistent with previous studies of the Houston homeless population. (Troisi, et al 2012), as shown in Charts 1-3 below. The average age of the respondents was 48.7, with a range of ages from 21-64. The mean age of women was slightly younger (45.8) vs than that for men (49.5).



Of the group who were housed, (11, 36.7%) 1 person lived in a subsidized apartment (9.1%), 5 in an apartment that was not subsidized (45.5%) and 3 in a house (27.3%). Two of the respondents did not specify their housing arrangements, but denied being homeless (18.2%) In response to inquiries about their health status more than half reported a disabling condition. Among those 35.3% (6) revealed a history of mental illness, 52.9% (9) a physical disability while 11.8% (2) had both.

◆ **INCOME SOURCES**

As noted earlier, 43.3% of the interviewees acknowledged that they engaged in panhandling as an income source. (Please see **Section IV: Profiles** for details). A higher percentage received SSI benefits (60%) and more than one-quarter of the group were employed (26.7%). Table 3 illustrates these findings.

● **TABLE 3: INCOME SOURCES**

	Number	Percent
Panhandling	13	43.3%
SSI	18	60.0%
Employment	8	26.7%
Other Benefits	8	26.7%
Family/Friend support	4	13.3%
Number in group	30	

Nearly two-thirds (19, 63.3%) of the interviewees told interviewers that they had multiple sources of income. For example, of the 13 people who panhandled for income, 53.8% also received SSI benefits and 23.1% were employed. Details of the configuration of income sources is found in Table 4 below.

● **TABLE 4: MULTIPLE SOURCES OF INCOME**

	Panhandling		SSI		Employment		Other Benefits		FF/ support	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Panhandling			7	38.9%	3	37.5%		0.0%	1	25.0%
SSI	7	53.8%			3	37.5%	7	87.5%	1	25.0%
Employment	3	23.1%	3	16.7%			1	12.5%		0.0%
Other Benefits		0.0%	7	38.9%	1	12.5%				0.0%
Family/Friend support	1	7.7%	1	5.6%		0.0%		0.0%		
Total	13		18		8		8		4	

◆ **CONGREGATING¹ DOWNTOWN**

According to the respondents, on average, over the month prior to the interview, they were likely to venture downtown 19 of 30 days. They noted that they had done so on average for 1 years. Six of the group frequented the area for less than 1 year (16.7%), while 4(13.3%) had done so for more than 25 years. They travelled to downtown with a combination of walking (63.3%), public transportation (66.7%) and biking (1%). Of those who use public transportation, 4% ride the rail system and 5% ride the bus. Five sites were designated by respondents as their preferred spots when venturing downtown. As Table 5 shows, sites along Main were more frequented. The library provided the group with the opportunity to use computers and access information and serves as a refuge from the weather, as needed.

● **TABLE 5: PREFERRED SITES**

β

Site	Number	Percent
Beacon	2	6.7%
Library	8	26.7%
Main	9	30.0%
Pavillion	2	6.7%
YMCA	1	3.3%
Not specified/No preference	8	26.7%
Number in group	30	

When questioned directly about what drew them to spend protracted amounts of time downtown, half the group, responded that they were there to congregate and spend time in public, in the company of other people, albeit often strangers. Another 33% wanted to access social services or medical services. Ten percent (10%) said that they wanted to buy food and 6.7% indicated that they wanted to use the library. Table 6 provides quotes from participants.

● **TABLE 6: SAMPLE QUOTES EXPLAINING REASONS FOR CONGREGATING DOWNTOWN**

REASONS FOR COMING DOWNTOWN	
Pretty nice. The rail is here I can go anywhere. The buildings here are nice.	Waiting for friends to go back to Pay Source. Already worked 5 minutes today and got paid for an hour.
I read, hang out, get away to stay away from bad influences	I was looking for legal services- divorce/custody battles. I'm stuck down here till I gain employment.

¹ The most commonly used categorical term for the activities of the respondents is “loitering.” This was not chosen in an attempt to avoid the equally common connotation of the term that in this case can only reinforce stereotypes of indigent and homeless persons. Several of the respondents refer to their activities as “hanging out,” which other vehemently rejected. Thus, with respect to them, that term was also not chosen for this report. Although, technically the term that was chosen “congregating” can denote a group assembly, it bears the least negative connotation and thus despite the imprecision will be used here.

REASONS FOR COMING DOWNTOWN	
The view, a lot of people come around. I like to people watch.	Looking for work and assistance

Grouping these reasons by the reported locations preferred by the respondents, shows that those who are congregating are dispersed over each of the sites, most frequently on Main. Table 7 illustrated the pattern of activities by site.

• **TABLE 7: REASONS BY LOCATION**

	Congregating		Services		Food		Library		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Beacon	2	13.3%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	6.7%
Library	2	13.3%	3	30.0%	1	33.3%	2	100.0%	8	26.7%
Main	5	33.3%	2	20.0%	2	66.7%	0	0.0%	9	30.0%
Pavillion	2	13.3%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	6.7%
YMCA	1	6.7%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	3.3%
Unspecified	3	20.0%	5	50.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	8	26.7%
Total	15	100.0%	10	100.0%	3	100.0%	2	100.0%	30	100.0%

Of note, is that none of the respondents specified that they were downtown for the purpose of panhandling, although 13 of the 30 acknowledged that they did generate income in this way. (see **Section IV: Profiles**). Further, although only 3 respondents indicated that they were downtown specifically to purchase food or a prepared meal, all but 4 did so while in the area. In total, 9% of those interviewed reported that they made purchases at some point while downtown. Half the group did so every time they in the area, another 44% made purchases frequently and only 1% indicated that they never bought anything. In Table 8, the purchasing behaviors of the interviewees are shown.

• **TABLE 8: FREQUENCY AND TYPE OF PURCHASES**

Purchasing Frequency	Food/Beverages		Merchandise		Cigarettes/Alcohol	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Always	15	55.6%	1	3.7%	8	29.6%
Sometimes	12	44.4%	3	11.1%	4	14.8%
Total	27					

The 27 respondents who make purchases frequent 3 types of stores, as shown below in Table 9.

• **TABLE 9: PURCHASE SITES**

	#	%
Convenience store	15	55.6%
Fast Food restaurant	1	3.7%
Discount store	18	66.7%
Total in group	27	

In the next section, the data are presented as profiles of 3 groups: 1) homeless respondents; 2) respondents who use panhandling for income; 3) respondents who visit downtown solely to congregate

SECTION IV. RESPONDENT PROFILES

While the previous sections reviewed the characteristics of the respondents as a group, their insights can be further understood in the context of profiles related to housing status and the practice of panhandling. **Section IV** presents findings as three group profiles:

- Respondents who are Homeless
- Respondents who Engage in Panhandling
- Respondents who are Congregating

◆ **RESPONDENTS WHO ARE HOMELESS**

Among the 30 respondents, 19 (63.3%) reported that they were currently homeless. They were encountered by the interviewers at the locations shown below in Table 1.

• **TABLE 1: INTERVIEW SITES**

	HOMELESS RESPONDENTS	
	#	%
Dallas @ Travis	1	5.3%
Dallas @ Main	7	36.8%
Main @ McKinney	3	15.8%
Main @ Walker	4	21.1%
Main @ Lamar	3	15.8%
McKinney @ Travis	1	5.3%
McKinney @ Fannin	0	0.0%
	19	

- **DEMOGRAPHICS**

The proportion of males among the respondents who were homeless was somewhat higher than in the group in aggregate (84.2%, 8% respectively). In contrast to the aggregated group, the racial composition was less evenly dispersed: 63.2% of the homeless respondents were White, 36.8% were African-American and none were Latino. They were also older, with an average age of 51.3 and a range of ages from 27-64.

A higher percentage of homeless individuals were disabled (58%) with 54% experiencing a mental illness and 63% a physical disability. Within the 58% two of the respondents, were diagnosed with both conditions. Research conducted locally and nationally consistently report higher rates of disabling conditions among the homeless and verify that these condition both causal homelessness and are a result of it. Table 11 lists some of the disabling conditions faced by these respondents. When considering this information, it is important to keep in mind that these are self-reports.

To be accurate, respondents would need to know their medical conditions and be willing to report them. Further, diagnoses of their conditions would have had been made. Earlier research, from numerous researchers have indicated that medical and mental health conditions among the homeless are greatly under-diagnosed and under-reported. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the health status of all the respondents is possibly more compromised than the report shows.

• **TABLE 11: SAMPLE OF DISABLING CONDITIONS**

MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS			PHYSICAL CONDITIONS		
	#	%		#	%
Bi-polar disorder	1	12.5%	Cancer	1	9.1%
PTSD	1	12.5%	Cardiovascular Disease	2	18.2%
Schizophrenia	3	37.5%	Diabetes	1	9.1%
Depression	2	25.0%	COPD	1	9.1%
Alcoholism	1	12.5%	Injury, Trauma	6	54.5%
	8	100.0%		11	100.0%

- **INCOME SOURCES**

Reviewing the sources of income for the homeless respondents reveals a more complex picture than the fact of their homelessness might suggest. All 19 homeless persons report some source of income and of the 9 (47%) who report panhandling, for only 2 of them is that their sole income source.

As Table 12 presents, 10 (53%) are receiving SSI benefits and 3 of them are also receiving other benefits. Five (26%) are employed and 4 (21%) are supported at least in part by family and/or friends. Table 12 further illustrates in that 12 (63%) of the homeless persons have multiple sources of income. The group had an average of 1.6 sources of income. Table 13 summarizes these data.

• **TABLE 12: SOURCES OF INCOME**

	PANHANDLING	SSI	OTHER BENEFITS	EMPLOYMENT	FRIENDS FAMILY	TOTAL INCOME SOURCES
1	✓	✓		✓		3
2			✓	✓		2
3		✓	✓			2
4		✓	✓			2
5		✓		✓		2
6	✓	✓				2
7	✓				✓	2
8	✓	✓				2
9		✓	✓			2
10	✓	✓				2
11	✓			✓		2
12		✓			✓	2
13	✓					1
14	✓					1
15					✓	1
16	✓					1
17					✓	1
18		✓				1
19				✓		1
Total	9	10	4	5	4	

No statistically significant differences were found in the number of income sources or the frequency of access of the individual sources between respondents who were housed and those who were homeless. Information was not collected on the amount of income respondents earned except by panhandling.

• **TABLE 13: SUMMARY OF INCOME SOURCES**

	HOUSED		HOMELESS		TOTAL	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Panhandling	4	36.4%	9	47.4%	13	43.3%
SSI	8	72.7%	10	52.6%	18	60.0%
Employment	3	27.3%	5	26.3%	8	26.7%
Other Benefits	4	36.4%	4	21.1%	8	26.7%
Family/Friend support		0.0%	4	21.1%	4	13.3%
Number in group	11		19		30	

• **CONGREGATING DOWNTOWN**

On average, the respondents who frequented the downtown area had done so for 9.5 years, with a range of 6 months to 40 years. During the past 30 days, they were downtown an average of 21 days (range: 1 day to daily) and spent on average 10 hours each day (range: 1 hour - 24 hours). Most of them walk to downtown (79%) and 57.8% (n=11) also use public transportation (54% bus; 63% rail). Two respondents (10.5%) bike

and walk. These respondents most often cited the library as their preferred location downtown. Table 14 shows the sites and Table 15 the reasons that respondents offered for their preferences.

TABLE 14: PREFERRED SITES

	HOUSED		HOMELESS		TOTAL	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Beacon	0	0.0%	2	10.5%	2	6.7%
Library	1	9.1%	7	36.8%	8	26.7%
Main	4	36.4%	5	26.3%	9	30.0%
Pavillion	2	18.2%	0	0.0%	2	6.7%
YMCA	1	9.1%	0	0.0%	1	3.3%
Not specified	3	27.3%	5	26.3%	8	26.7%
Number in group	11		19		30	

TABLE 15: REASONS FOR SITE PREFERENCES

LIBRARY	MAIN	BEACON	NOT SPECIFIED
Access to the computer.	It's close to the food store.	I'm just seeing what today holds	Looking for work, day labor
The fountains - I like sitting by the water	The rail is here I can go anywhere. The buildings here are nice.		I ran out of juice (Respondent uses a motorized scooter that was currently inoperable). No particular place.
I read, hang out, get away to stay away from bad influences	My Friends hang out there		

As shown below in Table 16, whether homeless or not, go downtown most often to congregate. For several of the respondents “congregating” gives them contact to other people and a way to fill their days. The services that sought downtown include food stamps, metro bus passes, legal services and day labor recruitment. Those who spoke of coming downtown for food were most often visiting Palmer Way Station or the other sources of meals and also the Food Pantries. Many also indicated that they purchased fast food at convenience stores, fast food establishments and vending machines.

TABLE 16: REASONS FOR VISITING DOWNTOWN

	HOUSED		HOMELESS		TOTAL	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Congregating	7	63.6%	8	42.1%	15	50.0%
Services	3	27.3%	7	36.8%	10	33.3%
Food	0	0.0%	3	15.8%	3	10.0%
Library	1	9.1%	1	5.3%	2	6.7%
Number in group	11		19		30	

When downtown, all but 2 of the respondents made purchases in local establishments. All 17 bought food and beverages, 35% as meals from fast food establishments. Merchandise included hygiene products and clothing. Only 2 of the respondents acknowledged buying alcohol. Table 17 illustrates these findings.

• **TABLE 17: PURCHASING FREQUENCY AND GOODS**

PURCHASING FREQUENCY	FOOD/BEVERAGES		MERCHANDISE		CIGARETTES/ALCOHOL	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Always	9	52.9%	0	0.0%	6	35.3%
Sometimes	8	47.1%	2	11.8%	4	23.5%
Total	17					

Table 18 shows that more than three-quarters of the respondents frequent discount stores for their purchases and specified Dollar Store as a preference. The most common purchases in convenience stores were cigarettes, snack foods and beverages.

• **TABLE 18: PURCHASE SITES**

	#	%
Convenience store	10	58.8%
Fast Food restaurant	6	35.3%
Discount store	13	76.5%
Total in group	17	

The next profile details the characteristics of respondents who use panhandling as a source of income.

◆ **RESPONDENTS WHO PANHANDLE**

For inclusion in this section, the interviewee would have reported that she or he used panhandling as a source of income.

• **LOCATION OF INTERVIEWS**

The respondents within this group who agreed to be interviewed were contacted in the 4 locations found in Table 19. That there are fewer locations represented in this section does not suggest that panhandling did not occur in the other intersections within the study area, but rather that recruitment of individuals who panhandle was successful only in these 4 locales.

• **TABLE 19: INTERVIEW SITES**

	RESPONDENTS WHO PANHANDLE	
	#	%
Main @ Dallas	5	38.5%
Main @ McKinney	2	15.4%
Main @ Walker	3	23.1%
Main @ Lamar	3	23.1%
	13	

• **DEMOGRAPHICS**

Of the 13 individuals who acknowledged panhandling, 84.6% (11) were male and 15.4% (2) were female. Slightly more than half (53.8%, 7) were African American and 46.2% (6) as White. The average age of the group was 45.5 (range 21-60). A higher proportion of disability than the aggregate or group of homeless respondents was found in this group (69.2%). Of those, 55% (4) had either a physical or mental health related disability and 11% (1) had both. With the exception of the interviewee who reported ADHD, each who indicated a disabling condition was also homeless, thus the similarity in the findings of the two analyses.

• **TABLE 20: SAMPLE OF DISABLING CONDITIONS**

MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS			PHYSICAL CONDITIONS		
	#	%		#	%
Bi-polar Disorder	1	20.0%	Cancer	1	20.0%
Schizophrenia	2	40.0%	Cardiovascular Disease	1	20.0%
Alcoholism	1	20.0%	Diabetes	1	20.0%
ADHD	1	20.0%	COPD	1	20.0%
			Musculoskeletal	1	20.0%
	5	100.0%		5	

• **HOUSING STATUS**

Most of those who panhandled were homeless (69.2%, 9). Of those who were housed, 1 individual lived in a non-subsidized apartment (7.7%), 2 in a house (15.4%) and 1 (7.7%) in an unspecified residence.

• **INCOME SOURCES**

Table 21 details the means by which those who panhandle support themselves. Only 4 (30.7%) use that method solely. More than half (53.4%) receive SSI benefits and 23% (3) are employed. None reported receiving other benefits or other entitlements and 1 was assisted by family or friends. Two claimed to have SSI benefits and a job as well as panhandling income. On average, the group had 1.8 sources of income.

● **TABLE 21: SOURCES OF INCOME**

	PANHANDLING	SSI	OTHER BENEFITS	EMPLOYMENT	FRIENDS FAMILY	TOTAL INCOME SOURCES
1	✓	✓		✓		3
2	✓	✓		✓		3
3	✓	✓				2
4	✓	✓				2
5	✓				✓	2
6	✓	✓				2
7	✓	✓				2
8	✓	✓				2
9	✓			✓		2
10	✓					1
11	✓					1
12	✓					1
13	✓					1
Total	13	7	0	3	1	

A summary of the sources of income between those who do and do not panhandle is found in Table 22. There was no statistically significant differences in the number of income sources and none in the other sources except for “other benefits” ($p = 0.028$).

● **TABLE 22: COMPARISON OF INCOME SOURCES**

	NO PANHANDLING INCOME		PANHANDLING INCOME		TOTAL	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
SSI	11	64.7%	7	53.8%	18	60.0%
Other Benefits	8	47.1%	0	0.0%	8	26.7%
Employment	5	29.4%	3	23.1%	8	26.7%
Family/Friend support	3	17.6%	1	7.7%	4	13.3%
Number in group	17		13		30	

Interviewees delineated the details of their panhandling, specifically the tenure, duration, reasoning about their choice and the amounts they earned. The duration of time that this group of respondents were visiting downtown ranged from 6 months to 40 years, with an average time of 10.5 years. Based on the respondents' report, the average income that might be earned on an average day is approximately \$19.14 (4.4 hours per day x \$4.35).

Over the course of the past month, using those calculations, the earnings might have totaled \$204.80. For 4 of the respondents, that amount would have been their entire income. According to the Social Security Administration the SSI monthly payment in 2013 for an individual is \$710. Thus, for 6 of the respondents, assuming the averages, monthly income might be \$914.80. Two of those 6 indicated some wages also. Again, it is important to note that these calculations use averages.

📌 **TABLE 23: PANHANDLING CALCULATIONS**

	MEAN	MAXIMUM	MINIMUM
Downtown: years	10.5	40	6 months
Downtown: days per month	22.7	30	1
Downtown: hours per day	7.8	24	1
Panhandling: years	6.1	20	6 months
Panhandling: days last month	10.7	30	1
Panhandling: hours per day	4.4	12	1
Panhandling: average earned hourly last month	\$4.35	\$10	< \$1
Panhandling: most earned last month	\$54.60	\$200	\$1
Panhandling: least earned last month	\$2	\$10	\$0

For homeless respondents, the panhandling calculations are somewhat different, although in this dataset, that difference is not statistically significant.² On average, those who were housed and panhandled had spent about 1 year longer than the homeless respondents congregating downtown and 4 more years panhandling. They were more active panhandlers--approximately 8 more days per month and reported higher intake per hour, maximum and even minimum amounts. Using their reported patterns, the average daily earning for the homeless respondent is \$18 (4.7 hours, \$3.83 per hour) and for the housed respondent \$20 (3.7 hours, \$5.50 per hour).

Over the course of the month, however, the housed person might earn twice what the homeless respondent might have. (\$18 per day for 8.4 days and \$20.35 per day for 16 days). Four of the homeless respondents and 3 of those who are housed receive SSI, which could bring monthly income totals to \$861.20 and \$1,035.60 respectively. In Texas, the approximate monthly earning for a full-time employee at minimum wage is \$1,256.67.³ Table 24 compares findings for homeless vs housed respondents who panhandle.

² Because only 4 of respondents who panhandled were housed, it is not possible to rule out that the hypothesis that housing status may effect panhandling. In addition, respondents were asked only about their current housing status, so no information is available about whether those who were housed had been homeless, nor the duration for those who currently homeless.

³ <http://www.minimum-wage.org/states.asp?state=Texas>

TABLE 24: COMPARISON BY HOUSING STATUS

	HOMELESS	HOUSED
Downtown: years	10.17	11.2
Downtown: days per month	21.9	24.5
Downtown: hours per day	6	5
Panhandling: years	4.9	9
Panhandling: days last month	8.4	16
Panhandling: hours per day	4.7	3.7
Panhandling: average earned per hour last month	\$3.83	\$5.50
Panhandling: most earned last month	\$47.44	\$70.75
Panhandling: least earned last month	\$1.99	\$2.25
Hypothetical daily average earning	\$18.00	\$20.35
Hypothetical monthly average earning	\$151.20	\$325.60
Hypothetical monthly average earning with SSI	\$861.20	\$1,035.60
Monthly Salary for FTE @ \$7.25/ hr (minimum wage)	\$1,256.67	

Respondents who acknowledged panhandling were asked if they would prefer a full time job at minimum wage to panhandling. Eleven of the 13 respondents (84.6%) indicated a preference for employment. Ten (76.9%) also told interviewers that they did not enjoy panhandling. Table 25 offers the comments of the respondents on their preferences. When considering these data, it is important to understand that despite the *intent* and the *preference* of the respondents, especially those who face chronic homelessness and disabling conditions, to work, they may in fact be unemployable or unable to maintain employment.

TABLE 25: INTERVIEWEE COMMENTS ABOUT PANHANDLING AND EMPLOYMENT

PREFER EMPLOYMENT	PREFER PANHANDLING
I can't stand it. It makes me want to beat my head against the wall. Pride. It's a pretty shameful thing for a grown man.	it's good money
Due to the limitations of programs that help people with drug problems/vet/etc - its infuriating I cant get help. People like me don't want to be here. I'm homeless, but I'm a student, I'm trying.	I'm an alcoholic I feel forced to panhandle.
I'm a man. I have pride. I don't wake up in the morning thinking I could panhandle.	It automatically happens.
You think I love living out here? Until 2 years ago I was working every day.	
I could take care of myself. I would much rather earn my way	

◆ **CONGREGATING DOWNTOWN**

The housed respondents who panhandled reported a preference for two sites: Main and Pavillion, while those who were homeless were more likely to be found at the sites on Main, the Library, or Beacon as shown in Table 26.

● **TABLE 26: PREFERRED LOCATIONS**

	HOUSED		HOMELESS		TOTAL	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Beacon	0	0.0%	1	11.1%	1	7.7%
Library	0	0.0%	3	33.3%	3	23.1%
Main	2	50.0%	4	44.4%	6	46.2%
Pavillion	2	50.0%	0	0.0%	2	15.4%
Not specified	0	0.0%	1	11.1%	1	7.7%
Number in group	4		9		13	

When asked what brought them downtown or to their preferred site, none of the respondents offered panhandling as a reason. Rather, 46% indicated they were there to “hangout.” 23% for services, another 23% to purchase food and 7.7% to use the library, as illustrated in Table 27.

● **TABLE 27: REASONS FOR VISITING DOWNTOWN**

	#	%
Congregating	6	46.2%
Services	3	23.1%
Food	3	23.1%
Library	1	7.7%
Number in group	13	

Those who offered to explain their choice to come downtown were much more vague than were either the homeless respondents or the group in aggregate. Two cited “convenience” without explaining to what the area was convenient. Most either avoided the question or commented on the physical space, “it’s a cool spot” or “Park is nice.” Just as none of the respondents decided to link their reason to being downtown to panhandling, neither did they explain their choice of site to the activity.

As shown throughout this report, several of the respondents participate in downtown commerce and within the panhandling subgroup, all do. Most often, the purchases were for food and beverages. Only 4 of the

respondents indicated that they ate at fast food restaurants, thus respondents are most often buying snack foods or sandwiches from convenience stores or discounts store. Table 28 and Table 29 show these trends.

● **TABLE 28: PURCHASE SITES**

	#	%
Convenience store	8	61.5%
Fast Food restaurant	4	30.8%
Discount store	8	61.5%
Total in group	13	

● **TABLE 29: FREQUENCY AND GOODS PURCHASED**

Purchasing Frequency	Food/Beverages		Merchandise		Cigarettes/Alcohol	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Always	7	53.8%	0	0.0%	4	30.8%
Sometimes	5	38.5%	2	15.4%	2	15.4%
Total	13					

● **PANHANDLING AND ENFORCEMENT OF ORDINANCES**

Most of the respondents who panhandle have been approached by police or others attempting to enforce local ordinances related to panhandling (69%, 9). Of those encounters, 78% (7) were conducted by police, 44% by DMD staff (4), 11% (1) by a shop owner and 11% (1) by a security guard. None of the respondents indicated that these events deterred them from continuing to panhandle nor did they report that the enforcement had an impact on their earnings.

● **TABLE 30: ENFORCEMENT ENCOUNTERS**

RESPONDENT	CONTACT	FREQUENCY
1	● Police ● Shop owner	● Daily
2	● DMD staff ● Police	● About 100 times
3	● Security guards ● Police	● Not specified
4	● DMD staff ● Police	● 3 times ● 2 arrests
5	● Police	● 3 times
6	● DMD staff	● Once
7	● Police	● 2 times
8	● Police	● Once
9	● DMD staff	● Few times per month

◆ **RESPONDENTS WHO CONGREGATE**

A small group of respondents (23%, 7) seemed at first to be a bit of an enigma with respect to their visits downtown. They were housed and did not panhandle. They had long histories--some as long as 25 years--of regular visits downtown and they told interviewers that they came there to “hang out.” They visit on average 10 days per month though most are there at least 3 days a week and one is there daily. This section will illustrate what hanging out meant to them.

Two of this group are female and 5 male. The youngest is 25 and the oldest, 62 (average: 46.7). Five live in an apartment, one receives a rental subsidy. One lives in a house and one did not say where he lives, but denied being homeless. They come downtown by rail and bus (85%, 6) and by foot (43%, 3). Once there, 85% move around rather than staying in one spot. More than half (57.1% 4) are disabled, with mental illness and physical disability in equal distribution.

Most (71%) received SSI and 57% also have other benefits. They did not report any support from family or friends. Two (28%) are employed, one as a part-time worker in a warehouse and the other did not specify where he worked. Table 31 depicts these findings.

● **TABLE 31: INCOME SOURCES**

	SSI	OTHER BENEFITS	EMPLOYMENT	TOTAL INCOME SOURCES
1			✓	1
2	✓	✓		2
3	✓	✓		2
4	✓	✓		2
5	✓			1
6	✓	✓		2
7			✓	1
Total	5	4	2	

Most of the respondents made purchases while downtown (71%, 5) All who shopped most commonly bought food and beverages. One respondent mentioned buying hygiene supplies and another also bought cigarettes (20%, 1) No one reported purchasing alcohol.

● **TABLE 32: PURCHASE SITES**

	#	%
Convenience store	2	28.6%
Fast Food restaurant	3	42.9%
Discount store	4	57.1%
Total in group	7	

As was seen throughout this study, being able to be downtown gave the respondents access to food, merchandise and other services. Several respondents alluded to an inability to work because of disability and being downtown breaks their isolation.

☛ **TABLE 33: REASONS FOR CONGREGATING**

RESPONDENT COMMENTS	# WITH SIMILAR RESPONSE	
	#	%
Just chilling. Watching people	6	85.7%
Wanted to get out today.	4	57.1%
Waiting for friends	3	42.9%
Looking for work	1	14.3%
Came to the library	1	14.3%

SECTION V. PREDICTING WHO WILL BE DOWNTOWN

Statistical modeling⁴ was used to create profiles of who might be likely to panhandle or congregate downtown. The models are set up as “what-if” propositions, with one parameter changed represented on each line. Thus, as Table 33 shows, in line 1, if a respondent were to have no source of income, the likelihood that he or she would be congregating downtown is 83.5%. In line 2, panhandling was changed from “no” to “yes”. With that changed, the likelihood decreased to 72.2%

☛ **TABLE 34: INCOME FACTORS PREDICTING LIKELIHOOD OF CONGREGATING DOWNTOWN**

	PANHANDLING	SSI	EMPLOYMENT	LIKELIHOOD
1	No	No	No	83.5%
2	Yes	No	No	72.2%
3	No	Yes	No	57.1%
4	Yes	Yes	No	40.3%
6	Yes	No	Yes	37.2%
5	No	No	Yes	30.0%
8	Yes	No	Yes	23.2%
7	No	Yes	Yes	13.4%

Table 34 Conclusion:

Access to adequate income decreased the likelihood of congregating downtown.

⁴ Obviously, there are a variety of variables that could be developed for this model. These are offered as examples. If the DMD is interested in more or deeper analyses, these can be easily provided.

The next scenario assesses the effect of demographic factors on respondents with respect to their choice to panhandle.

● **TABLE 35: EFFECT OF DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS ON LIKELIHOOD OF PANHANDLING**

	GENDER	AGE RANGE	HOUSING STATUS	LIKELIHOOD
1	Male	< 40	Housed	44.1%
2	Male	< 40	Homeless	57.6%
3	Male	>40	Housed	32.9%
4	Male	>40	Homeless	45.8%
5	Female	< 40	Homeless	43.4%
6	Female	< 40	Housed	30.7%
7	Female	>40	Homeless	32.2%
8	Female	>40	Housed	21.6%

Table 35 Conclusion:

Consistent with earlier studies, homelessness is still the more likely predictor of panhandling.

SECTION VI. SUMMARY

The findings in this brief study support earlier studies about homelessness and those concerning panhandling. More than three-quarters of the respondents acknowledged being disabled, but it is unclear to what extent the disabilities preceded or resulted from challenges associated with poverty. Most of the respondents were male, in their mid-forties on average, African American and White and less frequently, Latino. They participate in the commerce of downtown and appear to be undeterred by police, security guards or disgruntled shop owners and even after incarceration will return to their favorite sites downtown.

The majority, but not all of those who tend to congregate downtown are homeless. They struggle with higher rates of disability, both physical disability and mental illness. Several were employed, received SSI and other benefits and a few also had partial support from family or friends. The prediction model shows that income is a critical factor in determining the likelihood that someone will “hang out” downtown, regardless whether someone panhandles or not. This group offered a variety of reasons for being downtown--accessing services, searching for work, using the library. However, given the duration of time they have been coming downtown, the frequency of the visits, the duration of each suggests reasons that are more lifestyle than errand-related.

Several, but not all use panhandling as an income source. They panhandle because they need income and express humiliation, frustration and despair at having to resort to this method. Those who choose to panhandle are younger, mostly male, almost always have at least one other source of income, which they determine is inadequate to meet their needs. Though it is understood that income loss is associated with panhandling, most were also homeless. So, not only does homelessness spark congregating, it also pressures individuals to panhandling.

Still, another group is neither homeless, nor do they panhandle. These respondents congregate to access services, to find work, to meet friends, to break isolation or simply because they need to fill time. They have been visiting downtown for as many as forty years or as short a time as 6 months. Their visits are as frequent as daily or as rare as once a week and they stay in town for a few hours each time or spend all their time downtown.

So, homelessness, disability, poverty continue to predict congregating and panhandling. Ordinance enforcement strategies may deter some, but the study respondents indicate that these methods are inadequate. Many respondents live downtown, in low cost housing, in service agency shelters or on the streets. Downtown is their neighborhood. It is here that many of their social and interpersonal needs are met. Such needs are less well studied and even less frequently addressed. These considerations might be added to planning efforts.

The poor and homeless will continue to remain or journey downtown for services, to earn subsistence income and to intertwine with the vibrancy of the area. Partnerships among the city leaders, "congregators" service providers and business people that search for strategies that are mutually-respectful, innovative, compassionate, not based in punishment can be effective. Houstonians have developed such models as they faced natural disasters, averted recession and addressed homelessness. It is again time for collaboration.