

N A P O

Fact Sheet on Panhandling

Poor Bashing on the Streets of Canada: Anti-Panhandling By-Laws

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary:

Panhandle *vi* (1903) : to stop people on the street and ask for food or money : BEG

WHY DO CITIES HAVE BY-LAWS AGAINST PANHANDLING?

The most obvious reason that cities pass by-laws that restrict panhandling is to make it easier for police officers to remove people who beg from public spaces. The primary target of these by-laws seems to be panhandlers whose behaviour is unacceptably aggressive or disorderly and the concerns that are raised to justify the removal of panhandlers from public spaces in this way typically fall into one of two categories:

1. The presence of panhandlers infringes on the *public's* right to the enjoyment of public spaces. The definition of the word public in this case does not include people who panhandle. Frequently, business owners and less often individuals, will express concern that the aggressive or disorderly behaviour of panhandlers creates an environment that discourages citizens from passing through certain areas of a city.
2. The by-laws will actually *help* people who are poor by discouraging them from panhandling because panhandling allows people to maintain a lifestyle that is unhealthy. Typically, city councilors and administrators are sympathetic to the view that all people who beg or who are homeless have substance abuse problems, and therefore, the by-laws will force these people to seek help rather than money to support an alcohol or drug addiction.

Some of the cities in Canada that have by-laws against panhandling include:

Calgary **Ottawa**
Quebec City **Winnipeg**
Vancouver

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WHAT DO THE BY-LAWS SAY?

Generally the by-laws attempt to put restrictions on panhandling activity and/or prohibit aggressive or intimidating behaviour by people who are panhandling. The restrictions include things like:

- Preventing panhandling near banks, automated teller machines, bus stops, or liquor stores.
- Preventing panhandling from people in cars.
- Preventing panhandling after sunset.
- Preventing panhandlers from continuing to ask for money after someone has already refused.

The City of Ottawa stands out as the only Canadian city that has an outright ban on panhandling in all public areas, 24 hours a day.

THE PROBLEMS WITH THE BY-LAWS

1. These laws discriminate against people who are poor. It is only the poor who are being restricted from parts of a city that are supposed to be open to full public access. In a free and democratic society, public spaces should be accessible to all citizens provided that they are not engaging in behaviour that can cause harm to other citizens. We already have laws that prohibit behaviour that is harmful to others---we are not free to threaten others or cause public disturbances.

The act of panhandling does not harm anyone, whether it is done next the entrance of a bank or next to a vacant lot. Poor people are perceived to be more of a threat simply because they may not look or act the same as people who are not poor. The wording of the by-laws make it clear that it is the very presence of poor people on the streets asking for money that people are objecting to. Panhandling---begging for money---does not pose a threat to anyone.

2. Governments are criminalizing begging at the very same time that they are enacting legislation that is creating more poverty. The move by all levels of government to reduce support for people in need of social security has led to the growth in the numbers of homeless people in Canada as well as the need for more people to rely on the charity of others in order to survive. Asking strangers for money is a last resort for survival for many people who are poor as a result of government policies that have created the conditions that force people to beg. The criminalization of begging represents an abrogation of governments' responsibility to their citizens and an attempt to use the police to try to cover up the highly visible manifestation of the failure of government social and economic policies.

The manifestation of poverty through people begging may not be an aesthetically pleasing sight to some. And some people may feel annoyed by panhandlers who continually approach them on the streets. Maybe they should be annoyed. Maybe it is through being annoyed that more people will begin to realize that the current economic and social policy options that Canadian governments are pursuing are having a negative effect on the health and well-being of a large number of Canadian citizens as well as undermining the trust and compassion in our communities.