Introduction

- Most people who participate in panhandling in Philadelphia are also experiencing homelessness.
- Those who panhandle in Philadelphia can provide valuable information about the experiences and needs of the city’s homeless population.
- The signs of those who panhandle can serve many purposes in understanding this population, such as illustrating their needs and hardships and humanizing them to passersby through emotional appeals or humor.
- Information about this population has been collected in the past, but not in a qualitative manner.

Objectives

- To collect qualitative information about the lived experiences of people who panhandle in Philadelphia
- To use the information gained to inform the community about participants’ needs and experiences and to services and initiative benefitting this population

Methods

People who were asking for money or food using signs at various locations throughout Philadelphia on July 23-28, 2018 were surveyed.

Participants were first approached by the collaborating artist and offered money for their sign, and then offered additional money for their time if they were willing to answer survey questions.

Survey questions were open-ended and designed to elicit information about the daily experiences of those who panhandle, their interactions with passersby, and their experiences accessing services for the homeless, such as shelters. The survey also included a freelist question that asked participants to list what they thought people asking for money most often used it for.

Interview transcripts will be analyzed via thematic coding or freelist analysis as appropriate. A codebook will be constructed via researcher collaboration and transcripts will be coded using NVIVO software.

Preliminary Results

Complete results are pending, but preliminary themes from interviews include:

- Strong desire for interpersonal interaction with passersby because of a feeling of dehumanization associated with homelessness and panhandling
- Desire to find work, but an inability to do so due to the stigma associated with being a person experiencing homelessness
- Participants choosing to sleep on the streets following negative experiences with shelters, including administrative barriers, violence, theft, and poor sanitation
- Drug use as a method to cope with the physical pain of sleeping on hard surfaces, such as sidewalks or shelter floors

“Don’t be afraid to, like, leave your comfort zone, and, like, experience new stuff. And you know, You ain’t gotta be on the streets being dirty like we are, but you know, just like sometimes sit down and talk to me. It ain’t about the money.”

“Yeah that we’re still human. We’re still breathing and eating. They don’t have to be scared of us. You know the other day I had a group of kids, they were passing a water bottle around cause they were scared to bring it to me. Why? I’m a person.”

Conclusions

This project was a valuable opportunity to hear directly from a vulnerable population about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings while coping with homelessness. Philadelphia’s homeless population has received more attention due to the ongoing opioid crisis, and in Philadelphia many people co-experience addiction and homelessness. The findings of this project will be shared with the Philadelphia community to address the hardships disclosed by participants. The main goal of sharing the findings will be to improve treatment of people panhandling by passersby and to encourage policies and initiatives that can meet the needs of this population, including improving access to and quality of shelters and fair opportunities to obtain employment.

References

2. Cardboard Commentary: A Qualitative Analysis of the Signs From America’s St...EBSCOhost [Internet]. [cited 2018 Dec 9].
3. Philly mayor: Don’t give cash to panhandlers | PhillyVoice [Internet]. [cited 2018 Dec 9].