

## PANHANDLE APPRAISAL

### Study will examine the amount of money handed out to homeless

By [LYNNETTE CURTIS](#)  
[REVIEW-JOURNAL](#)



Tommy, 25, who did not want his last name published or face shown, stands Thursday near Cheyenne Avenue and Losee Road in North Las Vegas. Tommy said he plans to stay in Las Vegas even though his sign says he's trying to get to Texas.

Photo by [Ruben D. Luevano](#)/Review-Journal

Ever wonder how much cash people actually give to that guy with the handwritten "PLEASE HELP" sign at your highway exit ramp each day?

According to a thoroughly informal Review-Journal survey Thursday afternoon of panhandlers near Interstate 15 in North Las Vegas, it probably ain't much.

Thomas, a 45-year-old panhandler who was soliciting money by way of a cardboard sign near Cheyenne Avenue and Losee Road, said he makes \$20 to \$30 a day panhandling. He wouldn't give his last name.

Another panhandler near the intersection, 25-year-old Tommy, wouldn't give his last name, either. He said he collects about \$20 a day from local drivers while they're stopped at red lights.

Social service providers hope a local study on panhandling planned for next year will produce results that are a bit more scientific.

"The public sees these folks as the face of homelessness," said Shannon West, regional homeless coordinator for Clark County. "We want to get a determination: Is that really true?"

West cited a recent Denver survey on panhandling that determined citizens there doled out \$4.5 million a year to panhandlers. She suggested that many panhandlers might not actually be homeless and that the public's money might be better spent on organizations that provide long-term help instead of handouts on the street.

Results of the study would be used in a public education campaign.

West would like the study to gauge how much Southern Nevadans give to panhandlers, and she would like to talk to panhandlers themselves to "ascertain their status."

"We want to be able to say, if you really want to contribute, let's put it in this place instead," she said.

Some people, including Las Vegas Mayor Oscar Goodman, believe panhandlers do pretty well for themselves.

The mayor has said panhandlers at highway offramps make a "good amount of money," and he attributed that to local superstition. People think if they donate a few bucks to someone down on their luck, they might hit a slot machine jackpot.

But the two Toms disputed the notion they make a good living by panhandling. Both said they are homeless.

Dressed in a clean white T-shirt, jeans and a baseball cap, Thomas said he sleeps in truck stop lounges such as the one next to the intersection where he was panhandling.

He said he wouldn't seek help at a shelter because he was told local shelters charge men \$5 a night to sleep there.

"How are people who need help supposed to pay?" he said.

He also claimed Southern Nevadans are cheap.

"I've been here (at the intersection) about four hours," he said. "I've made \$6. This city sucks."

He said he had looked for work as a day laborer but the competition was too stiff, with about 50 men lined up for work.

Tommy, clad in a camouflage T-shirt and dusty cap, said he's been in town two weeks and sleeps "here and there."

His homemade sign stated that he was looking for help to get to Texas to see his mother "that's in bad health."

But he said he plans to stay in Southern Nevada and eventually hopes to work in construction.

"I don't like Texas," he said. "It's nasty."

He also said he had no plans to seek help from local social service providers.

Linda Lera-Randle El, director of the nonprofit Straight from the Streets program that works with the homeless, said the idea that panhandlers make a lot of money is "one of the biggest urban legends."

"There's always one person who tells me they saw a panhandler get into their Mercedes and drive away," she said. "I've never seen that. The majority are homeless."

She also said giving money to panhandlers won't necessarily keep them away from social service providers who can give them more comprehensive help, including mental health and substance abuse counseling.

"That doesn't keep chronic homeless people away from services," she said. "They are service resistant to begin with. If you withhold the dollar, they aren't all of a sudden going to have a revelation and seek help."

The Southern Nevada Regional Planning Coalition's committee on homelessness is planning to conduct the panhandling study after its January homeless census.

The last count of Las Vegas-area homeless people, done in January 2005, found about 13,000. People living in shelters, on the street, in hotel rooms and in apartments shared by several families because of rent costs were all counted in that census.

West said the committee wants to do the most comprehensive count yet and plans a second count next summer.

"We really want to see if there is a difference in our count seasonally," she said. "We need to get a solid base line."

The committee's budget allows up to \$150,000 to be spent on a homeless count and other evaluative studies. The committee is now accepting bids for both the homeless count and the panhandling study.

Review-Journal writer David McGrath Schwartz contributed to this report.