

# Should you give money to street beggars? essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Poverty](#)



There's been an alarming uptick in the number of street beggars around lately, especially at major intersections. A typical scene goes like this. The panhandler hoists a cardboard sign desperately pleading for help. He (or increasingly — she) approaches the driver's window of cars waiting at red lights. Once traffic comes to a stop, the beggar exits curbside, walks into the street, and begins parading between rows of cars, constantly on the prowl for kindhearted drivers willing to fork over a buck or two, or some loose pocket change. These exchanges seem innocent enough. However, they're also troubling for a few reasons. First, there seems to be more beggars now than ever before — particularly working Las Vegas street corners. I lack data to prove this. It's just a casual observation based on my daily routine and what I've observed around town. Sometimes, multiple beggars work the same intersection. I once (mistakenly) thought that panhandling was a reflection of the economy. Boom economy = less beggars. Bad economy = more beggars. But the unemployment rate and general economic conditions don't seem to impact the numbers of panhandlers and frequency of begging. Otherwise, Flint (Michigan) would be the begging capital of America.

Fact is, you're more likely to see beggars working the street corners of affluent areas of town. Here in Las Vegas, lots more panhandling goes on in Summerlin and Green Valley (richer areas) than the poor sections of town. I suppose beggars are simply flocking to where the money is. A far bigger concern is wondering how many of these beggars are, in fact, who they claim to be. Moreover, will the cash handout go towards food or be used to buy drugs or alcohol, usually the two vices that created homelessness in the first place? I suspect this fear is what makes most of us reluctant to give money

to someone to claims to be in dire need. We don't want our generosity abused. What's the point of giving money, if it goes to feed the cycle of self-destruction? [Footnote 1] Let's try and establish some common agreement. I think most of us really want to help the less fortunate. If someone is so destitute that they're forced to beg for a meal, then common human decency demands that we try and help them, even if they contributed to their own misfortune from abusing drugs or alcohol. No one (anywhere) should starve.

Period. No one wants to see bodies collapsing in the streets from hunger and thirst, no matter what the contributing circumstances. The dilemma comes from the uncertainty of knowing who's legitimately destitute versus those either too lazy to work (bad), or who are con-artists (worse). There's plenty of panhandlers out there who likely can be classified as truly needy, lazy people, or frauds. A fair number are truly in need. I think the percentages that fall into this category tend to be higher in big cities. Having lived in Washington, DC for several years, I witnessed far too many homeless people huddled together on street corners in sub-freezing temperatures to suspect that they were either lazy, or charlatans. Many had mental health issues. But what about able-bodied panhandlers? Are they just plain lazy? Their plight probably stems from a mix of different circumstances, some beyond their control. Some are too lazy, or refuse to work for low wages when they can make more money per hour begging on the streets. Others are most certainly helpless victims now at the tail end of a succession of personal misfortunes.

The real cretins of panhandling are the frauds — such as those who claim to be handicapped. Stories surface all the time on seemingly disfigured beggars who are in fact quite healthy, and who have nice homes and plenty of food. One of the most despicable recent examples of this was this report from New York City. FIFTH AVENUE BEGGAR EXPOSED AS A FRAUD

What's really most troubling about these disgraceful people is that they destroy our trust. They poison our desire to do what is kind and good. They ruin the genuine human need, inherent in most all of us, to comfort others. Indeed, seeing so many beggars using faith and patriotism (two of our most overrated virtues) to prey on altruistic victims takes the homeless debate to a new low. It's astounding to see so many signs claiming to be war veterans, or worse — overtly religious. Just about every cardboard sign ends with the words “ God Bless,” which makes me wonder what in the fuck happened to god's supposed “ blessing” that he made the sign holder a homeless drug addict? But I digress.

I've made a rather difficult personal decision that I will no longer give money to beggars. I'm not entirely comfortable with this, because I really do want to help. It pains me that the next person I say “ no” to may in fact be hungry. Which leads me to conclude this discussion with an entirely different perspective. Last week, I was walking down the street with Todd Anderson, who runs the production known as “ Poker Night in America.” A poorly-dressed, unshaven man who looked like he hadn't bathed in weeks approached us. He asked for a dollar to buy something to eat. Without hesitation, Todd reached into his pocket and pulled out a few bucks. He

handed it over to the man. The man thanked Todd and wandered off.

Afterward, I asked Todd if it bothered him that his generosity might be used to buy booze or drugs.

I questioned him about the efficacy of blindly handing out money on the streets to people claiming to be victims. He provided a positive and upbeat reply, characteristic of his good nature, which is common with many people (like Todd) who live in the Midwest. " I don't know if he's really homeless, or not," Todd said. " It doesn't matter. What does matter is that I'm fortunate. I can afford a few dollars. And if he blows the money on alcohol and drugs, that's too bad. But for every one like that, the next person may really be in need. I" m doing this on the off chance that this really is someone who can use some help." That's a pretty hard philosophy to argue with.