

Opinions regarding the accessibility, use, and value of meal token programs in the Downtown East Side of Vancouver, Canada: a panhandler's perspective.

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May, 2013**

Introduction

Panhandling is an important issue increasingly debated in Canadian urban centres.^{1,2,3} However the complexities underlying panhandling are numerous and can encompass the accessibility of social assistance, low income housing, cost of living, public health practices, and overall public safety.^{1,3,4,5,6,7} Some regard panhandling as an historical aspect of urban community, representing something that should be upheld and protected in the name of equality, human rights, and freedoms.^{1,7,8} Others condemn the action, associating the behaviour with joblessness, homelessness, and the use of illicit substances.^{1,2,4,7} While both groups are not mutually exclusive, evidence suggests that these associations directly affect public reaction to panhandling.⁷

Public reaction to panhandling is varied and can include charitable giving to organizations, such as food banks or shelters, and giving money directly to panhandlers. However, people often believe that a direct donation to panhandlers finances their addictions and should be avoided.^{2,7} Recently, a Vancouver based restaurant began a controversial meal token program. Patrons are given the option to purchase a transferrable token redeemable for one breakfast sandwich, which may be 'given' or 'donated' to someone in need. While this program has gained popularity among those who are uncomfortable with donating money directly to panhandlers, it has generated criticism from community groups and activists.^{9,10,11,12,13,14,15} Critics accuse the program of eroding the social foundation on which a diverse community exists, including the gentrification of a low-income neighbourhood, perpetuating the myth that panhandlers cannot be trusted with money, and that the token removes the ability to choose where one can acquire a meal.^{11,12,13}

Despite the debate, there is a notable absence of quantitative information on the experience and opinion of Vancouver based panhandlers regarding this program. Therefore, we undertook a survey of Vancouver panhandlers in order to obtain their opinion on the accessibility, use, and value of the meal token program.

Methods

Panhandling was defined as soliciting donations of money for personal use from a passerby, without providing any goods or services in return.¹⁶ Recruitment focused on the areas surrounding the restaurant offering the token-program, covering a maximum of two kilometres across the Downtown East-Side (DTES) and Granville corridor of Vancouver, British Columbia. To increase representation, the DTES was divided into five distinct regions: Gastown, Victory Square, Industrial, Oppenheimer, and Chinatown.

Prior to completing the survey, participants were informed regarding the investigators' intentions and how their responses would be used and protected and their verbal consent was obtained. This survey followed the rules of ethical conduct for survey research as outlined in the Code of Standards and Ethics for Survey Research.¹⁷ No personally identifying information (name, address) was collected.

Prior to the interview, participants were read a scripted paragraph communicating that the interviewer was not a representative of the restaurant offering the tokens, and that favourable or unfavourable opinions would receive the exact same reimbursement for participation. To avoid participant duplication, all interviews were visually screened and conducted by a single interviewer, and took place between January 10 and January 14, 2013. Participants were offered \$1 for the completion of a maximum of 10 questions which took 5 minutes to complete.

The questionnaire itself was designed to measure four major outcomes: awareness, accessibility, use, and overall opinion of the program. Secondly, the questionnaire included self-reported measures of hunger. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in appendix A. Data collected were entered using Access 2007, and analyzed using SAS 9.1.

Results

In total, 100 participants were surveyed. Ninety were recruited from the DTES (43 from Gastown, 29 from Oppenheimer, 8 from Victory Square, 6 from Industrial, and 4 from Chinatown), and 10 participants were recruited from the Granville corridor. The reported mean age of participants was 45 (range 18 to 68). Seventy-nine percent of participants reported their gender as male. See Table 1 for demographics.

Overall, 64% of participants knew of the meal token program prior to this survey, and of these, 83% had received at least one token. The vast majority of participants that received at least one token reported receiving them from passers-by (85%), while 15% received tokens from friends or relatives, and 15% from shelters, charities, or a foundation.

The average number of meal tokens received by panhandlers located in the DTES was 1.2 (range 0 to 8), compared to an average of 5.8 (range 0 to 22) tokens per participant located in the Granville corridor.

Over two-thirds (68%) of those surveyed had redeemed at least one token for a meal, 28% had given at least one token away to others, and 17% had yet to redeem their tokens. Furthermore, 8% of participants had at least one token either stolen or lost, and 6% reported trading at least one token for goods or services. Interestingly, only 38% of participants from the Granville corridor reported redeeming at least one token for a meal, while 75% reported giving at least one token away to others. Every participant that redeemed a token for a meal reported liking the sandwich.

The majority of all participants (86%) thought the token program was a good idea, while 9% were unsure, and 5% did not think the token program was a good idea. Associated comments by participants about the 'worth' of the token program can be found in appendix B. Interestingly, 3 participants who held a token at the time of the interview were unaware of what the token was to be used for, as there are no specific instructions on the tokens themselves. In addition, 61% of those surveyed would prefer cash over a token.

High degrees of hunger, assessed using a question modified from the Canadian Community Health Survey¹⁸, appear to be present in the DTES, as only 18% of all respondents indicated they can always afford to buy food (Table 2).

Discussion

The majority of DTES panhandlers were located and interviewed in either Gastown or Oppenheimer, while very few panhandlers were located in Industrial, Victory, or Chinatown. This may be reflective of pedestrian traffic during business hours. While we expect that individuals panhandling in the DTES would be residents of the DTES, we did not attempt to identify current residence or dwelling.

Hunger is a complicated topic, and must be considered carefully as it relates to the DTES. As of this publication, there are approximately 21 locations in the DTES that provide meal services at no cost or low-cost.¹⁹ Therefore, measuring food insecurity using the modified CCHS question in the DTES may not be the most accurate method, considering that this question measures the participant's ability to afford food, not necessarily overall access to food.

While not directly measured by this questionnaire, many participants expressed frustration towards having to line up and wait for food offered by charities and shelters. This may explain, at least in part, the overwhelming positive opinion of the meal token program from DTES participants, where those who received a token could access a meal when convenient without waiting in line and without the perception of social stigma. This is in contrast to some participants located in the Granville Corridor, who expressed an unwillingness to travel to the DTES in order to redeem their tokens, citing safety concerns and an overall negative opinion of the neighbourhood.

Conclusion

The meal token program appears to be widely accepted by Vancouver based panhandlers located in the DTES and Granville corridor of Vancouver, British Columbia. The majority of tokens donated to panhandlers are redeemed at the restaurant supplying the tokens, and very few tokens are traded between individuals for goods or services. On average, a large proportion of tokens are donated to panhandlers located in the Granville corridor; however, these panhandlers are the least likely to redeem their tokens, opting to give them away at no cost to others. None of the participants reported disliking the meal they received.

Tables

	Gastown	Oppenheimer	Victory	Industrial	Chinatown	Granville	Overall
Participation (%)	43 (43%)	29 (29%)	8 (8%)	6 (6%)	4 (4%)	10 (10%)	100
Male (%)	32 (74%)	23 (79%)	5 (63%)	6 (100%)	4 (100%)	9 (90%)	79 (79%)
Median Age (Range)	46.7 (28-68)	43.5 (20-65)	41.8 (28-68)	52.33 (47-63)	48.3 (39-55)	35.6 (18-57)	44.7 (18-68)
Knew of the meal token program (%)	32 (74%)	14 (48%)	3 (38%)	4 (67%)	2 (50%)	9 (90%)	64 (64%)
Received at least one token for a meal (%)	27 (63%)	10 (34%)	2 (25%)	4 (67%)	2 (50%)	8 (80%)	53 (53%)
Liked the meal they received (%)	27 (100%)	10 (100%)	2 (100%)	4 (100%)	2 (100%)	8 (100%)	53 (100%)

Thought the meal token program is a good idea (%)	40 (93%)	25 (86%)	3 (38%)	6 (100%)	3 (75%)	9 (90%)	86 (86%)
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Table 2. Self-reported hunger, as measured by the question: “I am often hungry, but I don't eat because I can't afford enough food”

	Gastown	Oppenheimer	Victory	Industrial	Chinatown	Granville	Overall
Often True	11 (26%)	15 (52%)	4 (50%)	1 (17%)	2 (50%)	2 (20%)	35 (35%)
Sometimes True	23 (53%)	12 (41%)	2 (35%)	4 (67%)	1 (25%)	5 (50%)	47 (47%)
Never True	9 (21%)	2 (7%)	2 (25%)	1 (17%)	1 (25%)	3 (30%)	18 (18%)

Appendix A: Questionnaire

Date:	Gender:	Age:	Neighbourhood:
<i>Show participant image of meal token.</i>			
1. Have you heard of the Save on Meats token program?			<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Uncertain
<i>If yes.</i>			
2. How many tokens have you received in the past month?			Indicate number of tokens:
<i>If participant reports receiving 1 or more token:</i>			
3. How did you get your token(s)? <i>Select all that apply</i>			<input type="radio"/> A passer-by <input type="radio"/> A shelter, charity or foundation <input type="radio"/> A friend or relative <input type="radio"/> Other, please specify
<i>If participant reports receiving 1 or more token:</i>			
4. What have you done with your token(s)? <i>Select all that apply</i>			<input type="radio"/> Redeemed at Save On Meats <input type="radio"/> Traded with someone else for goods or services <input type="radio"/> Given to another person for free <input type="radio"/> Stolen <input type="radio"/> Lost <input type="radio"/> Other
<i>If participant reports redeeming a token at SOM:</i>			
5. Did you like the sandwich you received? <i>Select one</i>			<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Uncertain
6. How true is the following statement: I am often hungry, but I don't eat because I can't afford enough food. <i>Select one</i>			<input type="radio"/> Often True <input type="radio"/> Sometimes True <input type="radio"/> Never True
7. In a typical week, how many days can you not afford enough food?			Indicate number of days:

<p>8. Would you prefer to receive cash instead of a token? <i>Select one</i></p>	<p><input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> No preference</p>
<p>9. Do you think the Save on Meats meal token program is a good idea? <i>Select one</i></p>	<p><input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Uncertain</p>
<p>10. Why do you think this? <i>Transcribe.</i></p>	

Appendix B: Associated comments by participants (Question 10)

Responses from participants who thought the program was a good idea.

- Tokens are better than nothing.
- Helps people eat.
- Food is food.
- Better than using my money to buy food, can just use the token.
- People only spend money on dope.
- Getting a token would be better than nothing, and encourages people to be generous if they are not comfortable giving cash.
- It gets more people to give and helps hunger. It's also easy to redeem, not like standing in a line.
- Strangers just walk by and hand them out. I can tell they are more comfortable giving me tokens instead of cash.
- Helps people when they're hungry.
- The tokens are feeding people, and I love ham.
- Feeds street people, tokens are good for food.
- The money goes back into the community and helps feed the poor. It's a win/win.
- It's just a good idea.
- Helps people one way or another. They won't spend it on other shit.
- It can help people who don't get enough food.
- If someone needs money, they'll take the token.
- It's not cash so people can't spend it as easily on something that's not food.
- If I got a token, I wouldn't be able to spend it on other things.
- Lots of people here can't afford food.
- If I get a token, I know that I have a meal.
- People here are better off with the item, not the cash.
- Having a token would give me an incentive to eat. I can use the token to eat and use my cash on essentials.
- They're not dirty, and the tokens bring me comfort that I have a meal and the staff are polite. Would like different tokens for different meals.
- Helps people like me with limited income get food instead of other stuff.
- The tokens help people eat instead of buying drugs. People don't know where I spend money and what I use it for, but with tokens, they do.

- People don't seem to want to give cash around here to fuel addictions. People would probably feel more comfortable giving tokens instead.
- Tokens deter people from spending on drugs.
- The more companies that do this I'll go spend what money I have there. Keeps the community together.
- Everyone here is hungry. There's so much drugs, it takes all the money. Tokens will help people eat.
- Having a token would beat standing in a food line where people cut in and take your food, and I could always sell my token if I had to.
- Tokens would help me understand that I have to eat.
- Tokens would help me eat and not spend my money stupidly.
- If I had a token, I could save my money for other things.
- The tokens let hungry people eat and supports a local business.
- When I'm hungry, I could go get a sandwich when I wanted instead of waiting in line, or I could save it for later when I'm hungry then.
- If people get cash, it's not often spent on food.
- I can go get a sandwich when I'm hungry instead of waiting in line.
- The token gives me another choice of where to eat.
- The token gives me an incentive to eat, and the food is good.
- The tokens are worth more than a dollar, but the dollar can be spent anywhere on whatever I want.
- People give more when they have a token instead of cash, and something is better than nothing.
- I hate lining up for food, going to a store for a sandwich would make me feel better about myself.
- If I had a token, I could just go there when I'm hungry. I wouldn't have to worry about people butting in line and taking all the food, plus with a token I know I'll actually get food.
- When the shelters are full or the lines are too long, I can just go there to eat instead.
- The tokens help me out when I'm in a time of need.
- People who get a token won't blow it on dope. They'll get food instead of drugs.
- A lot of people are addicted. Sooner or later they will be hungry and will get an excellent meal that's better than McDonalds.
- I like the logo, and I thought these guys were closed. It was good to see them open again.
- If people give me cash, I buy dope. Cash is not a good idea.
- At least the token is something to eat.
- If somebody is really hungry and short on food, the token will help them.
- At least this program will help people in need.
- This sounds like a pay-it-forward kind of thing, so it's good for sure.
- People will feel better about passing something to the less fortunate, and they know how it's going to be used.
- Tokens are a guaranteed meal.
- People handing out tokens helps the poor people who need it.
- Tokens can be used totally for food and we can put the money we get towards other expenses.
- Save on Meats has great food to eat
- The food there is excellent and it supports a local business.
- They are great for when people don't have cash for food, but I can still sell tokens if I have to.

- Tokens give people something to eat, and it's good that you can't spend on something else.
- Nobody likes carrying cash around here, having tokens makes them feel safer, but I'd like to see different tokens for different things.
- People who give me money don't want to support my habits, and I like getting something not nothing.
- Tokens remind me to eat because I forget about eating sometimes.
- People need to eat, and this charity is good.
- I'd rather get a token so I don't spend it on other things only food.
- Tokens can help people get something to eat, and that's helpful.
- Lots of people don't have the money for food, so if it helps get them food then it's good. It's also good that they can't use it for drugs.
- Helps people who would otherwise go without, and the sandwich is good and nutritious.
- Something is better than nothing.
- It's a good idea because if someone gives cash, it will for sure be spent on drugs.
- Saves me from going out to buy dope. At least I know that I can eat when I need to.
- Food is better than nothing.
- The tokens can't be spent on something other than food.
- Makes people feel better about giving something, but I give most of my tokens away because I always have enough food.
- The token entitles you to a meal at the very least, but I don't go that way very often because I don't like the area.
- I try not to go to the East side very often, I don't like the vibe. But people that won't give money will give a token, and it's better than nothing.
- Tokens won't go towards drugs.
- It makes people feel ok about giving me something.
- Helps people out.
- It good that people can give me and my friends tokens when they don't want to give cash.
- A token is better than nothing.
- It's a good way to get good food before drinking.
- Need the tokens at times because you always have to get food before you do anything else.
- Gives me a way to eat when I need it.
- I know a lot of people around here that this can help.

Responses from participants who did not think the program was a good idea:

- Variety is important to me, and I want to have the choice of where I eat and where I spend money and what I spend money on.
- These tokens put power in the wrong hands, I don't support corporations.
- Sounds like food stamps. Might as well be living in the US. The food is only available at times, I'll just sell or trade for cash.
- Sounds like people will just sell the tokens for drugs anyways.
- People only give these so they feel better about not supporting drugs, but people will use these to get drugs anyway.

Responses from participants who were undecided about the program:

- I guess it's free advertising for the company, but I don't go there it didn't help me.

- I can see how this helps some people, but sometimes you just need the cash.
- This is a good idea for addicts because they can't buy drugs, but I need cash to live.
- Doesn't matter to me, I always have food.
- If I need drugs and I'm pan handling, the token would piss me off. I'll just sell it.
- No reason.
- No Comment.
- No Reason.
- I never go to the East side so it doesn't help me.

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