Panhandling and Giving Habits

According to the 2007 Hillsborough County Homeless Coalition Homeless Census, there were around 10,000 homeless people in Hillsborough County, Florida during that year. However, considering the recent state of the economy, that number has probably increased over the last two years. Those of us living in Hillsborough County are accustomed to seeing and even interacting with this population on a daily basis. It is not uncommon to see members of the homeless population panhandling at various intersections and locations throughout the county. Noticing this behavior so frequently is what led me to choose it as the subject of my observation exercise.

Variables

Having recently moved to Tampa, I was initially surprised about the size of the homeless population in the city. I decided to observe how many people actually donate money or other items to panhandlers. I broke this down further by choosing variables that include the type of donation given, gender, and verbal exchange between the subject and donator (see Table 1). The type of donation was further broken down into values of cash, change, and other. Gender included male or female and verbal exchange was classified by the subject speaking, donator speaking, mutual exchange, or no conversation.

Table 1

Variable	Description	Value
Contribution	Giving money/goods to the subject	Cash Change Other
Gender	Gender of person making donation	Male Female
Verbal Interaction	Conversation/Statements	Mutual verbal exchange Statement by subject Statement by donator No conversation

Sampling Method

Because people are more likely to donate money when they are in close proximity to a panhandler, I decided to monitor the first 5 cars stopped at each red light for 10 light cycles. This type of sampling is considered purposive. According to Powell (2004), purposive sampling is determined completely on the researcher's own knowledge regarding the subject. Although this type of sampling can often be biased, I thought it was appropriate for this type of observation. Light cycles change quickly and it can be dangerous walking into traffic, so the cars stopped closest to the subject have more of an opportunity to donate money.

In order to observe the variables I chose, it was necessary to find a panhandler in a location where I would be close enough to see the interactions between the subject and donator, but also remain unobtrusive. This seemed like it would be a lot easier than it actually was. Because I was looking for a subject that is part of a transient population, I could not predetermine the location for my observation. On February 26, 2009 I drove around Hillsborough County for 2 hours before I located an appropriate subject at the intersection of Himes Rd. and Hillsborough Ave at 6:30 pm. The location, however, was ideal. I was able to park at a Wendy's restaurant facing the intersection diagonally. From there I had a close and

clear view of both the subject and cars stopped at the light. There was also enough traffic and customers at the restaurant that I was able to blend into the surroundings. The observation was going very well and I was able to record the data I needed easily. However, after 5 light cycles, the subject left the area.

On February 27, 2009, I again ventured out to find a subject I would be able to observe through 10 light cycles. This time I was more prepared. I had various friends and coworkers on the lookout for an appropriate subject. This type of sampling resembles a snowball sample, which is used when members of the population being observed are difficult to locate (Powell, 2004). Although I was not actually obtaining information from other members of the population, it was still effective. About 45 minutes after beginning my second search, I received a call informing me that there was a man panhandling on 5oth St. at the exit from the I4 interstate. There were two gas stations in close proximity and I parked at the Marathon gas station on 50th St. to observe the subject at 5:20 pm. Everything was going well until my second subject also left the area after a short time, staying through 6 light cycles.

Findings

Although I planned on observing a single subject through 10 light cycles, this turned out not to be possible. Therefore, I considered the data I collected regarding each subject both individually as well as combined. During the 5 light cycles during which I observed subject 1, there were 6 total donators out of 25 cars (see Table 2). This averaged out to about 1 car per cycle with 24% of the cars making donations. Although I could not see how much money the subject was given by each donator, I was able to determine that 50% of the donations were paper bills compared to change, which consisted of 33% of the donations. One donator also gave the subject what appeared to be a cheeseburger or other type of sandwich. The donators also

consisted mostly of males, making up 67% of the donators. The majority of donators (67%) had a mutual conversation with the subject.

Table 2

Subject	Light Cycle	Gives Cash	Gives Change	Gives Other	Male	Female	2-Way Conversation	Subject Speaks	Donator Speaks	No Conversation	Total Donators
1	1		1			1		1			1
	2	1			1		1				1
	3	1		1	1	1	2				2
	4		1		1		1				1
	5	1			1					1	1
Total	5	3	2	1	4	2	4	1	0	1	6
Percentage		50%	33%	17%	67%	33%	67%	17%	0%	17%	24%

During the 6 light cycles that I observed subject 2, there was a 20% donation rate among the 30 cars that I observed (see table 3). It is interesting that although I was in a completely different area of Tampa observing a different subject, the percentage of donators is relatively very close to the first observation, which was 24%. Overall, there was a 22% contribution rate among 55 cars (see table 4). The rate of mutual conversation among the subject and donor remained the same for both observations at 67%. The rate of giving cash (50%) was also the same. The biggest difference between the two cases is the percentage of donators by gender. Donators to subject two were equally male and female, diverging greatly from the first case in which females only made up 33% of the sample.

Table 3

Subject	Light Cycle	Gives Cash	Gives Change	Gives Other	Male	Female	2-Way Conversation	Subject Speaks	Donator Speaks	No Conversation	Total Donators
2	6		1		1		1				1
2	7	2			1	1	1		1		2

3	8										0
2	9	1	1		1	1	1		1		2
3	10										0
3	11		1			1	1				1
Total	6	3	3	0	3	3	4	0	2	0	6
Percentage		50%	50%	0%	50%	50%	67%	0%	33%	0%	20%

Table 4

Subject	Light Cycle	Gives Cash	Gives Change	Gives Other	Male	Female	2-Way Conversation	Subject Speaks	Donator Speaks	No Conversation	Total Donators
1	1		1			1		1			1
	2	1			1		1				1
	3	1		1	1	1	2				2
	4		1		1		1				1
	5	1			1					1	1
2	6		1		1		1				1
	7	2			1	1	1		1		2
	8										0
	9	1	1		1	1	1		1		2
	10										0
	11		1			1	1				1
Total	11	6	5	1	7	5	8	1	2	1	12
Percentage		50%	42%	8%	58%	42%	67%	8%	17%	8%	22%

Lessons Learned

There is a general correlation between the two sets of data, but there is also some disparity in the results. The differences in the data for gender leave some cause for concern. In the first observation, 4 out of 6 donators were male, making up 67% of donators. In contrast, 50% of the donators were male in the second observation. This sample size is so small that may not be completely representational. On the other hand, the percentages of giving cash and having a mutual conversation were exactly the same in both observations. If I were going to conduct another observation of this magnitude, I would ensure that I had enough time to be able

to locate and observe subjects for longer durations in order draw more informed conclusions on the subject.

References

Homeless Coalition of Hillsborough County (2007). Facts about Homelessness. Retrieved February 28, 2009 from http://www.homelessofhc.org/HChomelessfacts.htm.

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