



International Council on Canadian, Chinese and African Sustainable Urbanization



Sponsored by

Office of the Vice-President,
Research and Innovation
University of Ottawa

Global Ideas, Local Solutions

Caring for Individuals Seeking Assistance at Urban Intersections

Opening a Necessary
Conversation in Canadian Cities

03 May 2026

<https://icccasu.org/>

Executive Summary

Roundtable at a Glance

Panhandling at urban intersections is an increasingly visible yet insufficiently understood issue in Canadian cities. This roundtable brought together stakeholders across sectors to examine its structural drivers, including housing affordability, income insecurity, and service gaps, while also recognizing that its occurrence at busy intersections raises important public safety concerns for drivers, pedestrians, and the individuals involved. Discussions highlighted the need to balance human dignity with public safety, recognizing intersections as both spaces of risk and visibility. Insights from local evidence and international experience emphasized that enforcement alone is insufficient and may lead to displacement rather than solutions. This initiative marks an important first step toward a more open, coordinated, and evidence-based dialogue, laying the groundwork for future collaboration and action.

April
2026

Opening Remarks

- 01 **Dr. Cintia Quiroga**
Director, Research and Innovation,
University of Ottawa
- 02 **Stéphanie Plante**
City Councillor,
Rideau-Vanier Ward, Ottawa
- 03 **Professor Huhua Cao**
Co-President, ICCCASU, Professor,
University of Ottawa

Moderator

Mr. Mathieu Fleury
Professional in Residence on
Housing Innovation Alex Trebek Forum for
Dialogue,
University of Ottawa
Former Ottawa City Councillor

Setting the Context

- 01 **Professor Benjamin Gianni**
Vice-President, ICCCASU, Professor,
Carleton University
- 02 **Dr. Ian Cooper**
Director, Housing Policy Operations,
Infrastructure Canada
- 03 **Douglas Ragan**
Managing Director, Turning Tides,
Garden Bay, British Columbia

Discussing Panel

- 01 **Kaite Burkholder Harris**
Executive Director,
Alliance to End Homelessness Ottawa
- 02 **Sandra Clarkson**
President and CEO,
Calgary Drop-In Centre
- 03 **John Heckbert**
Executive Director,
Operation Come Home Ottawa

From Visibility to Structural Understanding

On April 30, 2026, a bilingual roundtable titled “Caring for Individuals at Urban Intersections” was held at the University of Ottawa (FSS 4004), bringing together representatives from federal and municipal governments, academia, and community organizations to examine the growing issue of panhandling in Canadian cities. This event was organized by ICCASU and sponsored by the Office of the Vice-President, Research and Innovation at the University of Ottawa. It represents one of the first initiatives in Canada to focus specifically on panhandling at urban intersections as a distinct and increasingly visible urban issue.

The roundtable was held in the context of ICCASU’s renewed vision -“Global Ideas, Local Solutions” -which seeks to translate global

knowledge and comparative experience into concrete, locally grounded actions. In this spirit, the discussion aimed not only to better understand the issue, but also to explore how international insights can inform practical responses in Canadian cities. Rather than approaching panhandling as an isolated phenomenon, participants framed it as a visible expression of broader structural pressures, including housing affordability, income insecurity, mental health, and social exclusion, while also recognizing that its presence at intersections raises immediate concerns related to public safety—for drivers, pedestrians, and the individuals themselves—requiring a careful balance between safety and human dignity.

Panhandling at intersections is only the surface of deeper issues, sitting where human dignity intersects with public safety.

Prof. Huhua Cao
Co. Founder

Opening Remarks

Naming the Human and Urban Challenge

The session was moderated by Mr. Mathieu Fleury, Professional in Residence on Housing Innovation at the Alex Trebek Forum for Dialogue and former Ottawa City Councillor, who set the tone by emphasizing the importance of creating an open and inclusive space for dialogue, where diverse perspectives—particularly those grounded in lived and frontline experience—could be heard. He noted that the purpose of the roundtable was not to deliver immediate solutions, but to begin a more honest and constructive conversation around a complex issue that often remains difficult to address publicly.

“How do we protect the dignity of those in need? We want to look away at the same time, because what we see is too painful. Those are deeply human questions, and they deserve thoughtful and compassionate consideration.”

— Dr. Cintia Quiroga
Director, Research and Public Policy,
University of Ottawa



The opening speakers collectively framed the issue as both deeply human and structurally complex. Dr. Cintia Quiroga, Director of Research and Public Policy at the University of Ottawa, reflected on the emotional and ethical dimensions of encountering visible distress in public space, observing that: “Every day, in cities across Canada, we encounter this reality... how do we protect the dignity of those in need?” Her remarks positioned intersections as moments of encounter—places where individual reactions, social expectations, and institutional responsibilities



intersect. Ms. Stéphanie Plante, City Councillor for Rideau-Vanier, grounded the discussion in Ottawa’s evolving urban reality, noting that panhandling and visible homelessness are no longer confined to the downtown core but are increasingly present across different parts of the city, reflecting broader systemic pressures. Dr. Huhua Cao, Professor at the University of Ottawa, emphasized that what is visible at intersections is often only the surface of deeper structural challenges, while also underlining a critical point: “Because it happens at intersections, it also raises very real concerns about safety- for drivers, pedestrians, and the individuals themselves.” This dual perspective - linking human dignity and public safety - provided a central framing for the discussions that followed.

“There’s a real philosophical, but there’s a real practical aspect of urban intersections... in terms of poverty, in terms of addictions, but there’s a reality also of a physical space, a connecting space between mobility, transportation, pedestrian, and individual safety.”

— Mr. Mathieu Fleury
Professional in Residence on Housing Innovation Alex Trebek
Forum for Dialogue,
University of Ottawa Former Ottawa City Councillor

Building the Framework

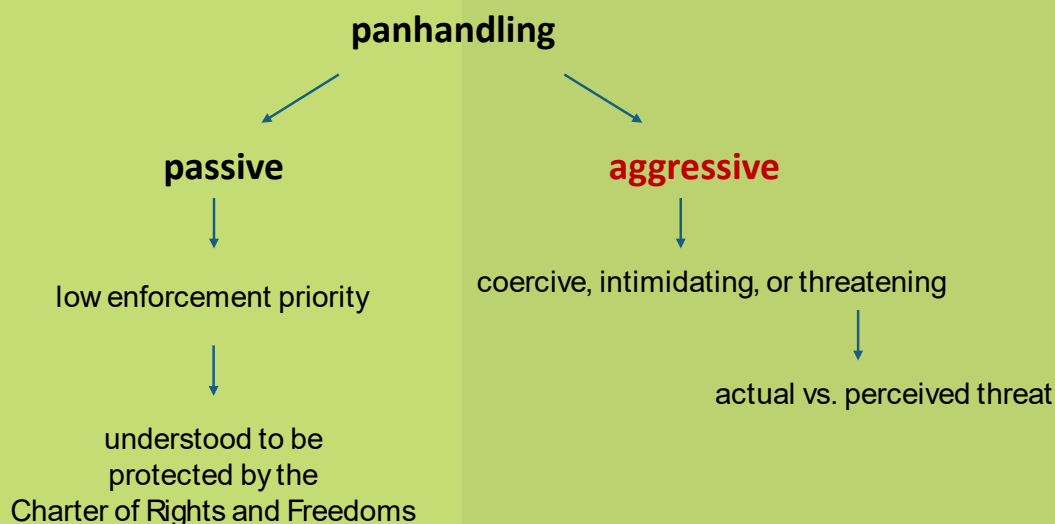
From Local Evidence to National Context

The first part of the roundtable focused on establishing a more systematic understanding of panhandling. Professor Benjamin Gianni (Carleton University) provided a structured analytical framework that helped situate the issue within broader urban dynamics. Drawing on an ICCCASU project conducted in Toronto—where approximately 300 interviews were carried out to assess public perceptions of panhandling—he clarified key distinctions between passive and aggressive solicitation and explored their legal and policy implications. His intervention helped set the context by challenging common assumptions: while safety concerns are frequently raised, empirical evidence directly linking panhandling to traffic incidents remains limited, and enforcement-based responses often lead to displacement rather than resolution.

“Fines are rarely effective as a deterrent because the individuals involved are seldom able to pay them. Enforcement-based approaches tend to displace rather than to eliminate panhandling.”

— Professor Benjamin Gianni,
ICCCASU and Carleton University.

defining panhandling...



Reviewing the legal landscape, Prof. Gianni surveyed the regulatory architecture of three Canadian jurisdictions: Ontario’s Safe Streets Act (which regulates rather than prohibits, restricting solicitation of “captive audiences” including motorists); the parallel municipal-bylaw regime in Calgary; and the comparatively permissive stance of Vancouver. He observed that empirical evidence linking intersection panhandling to traffic-collision outcomes remains limited, and that fines are seldom recovered because the population subject to them is rarely able to pay. Enforcement, in consequence, tends to produce geographic displacement rather than reduction in incidence. He concluded by enumerating responsive models including Calgary’s HELP team in partnership with Alpha House, Toronto’s Streets to Home initiative, and Vancouver’s harm-reduction co-response, alongside Ottawa-area partners (Operation Come Home, Options by Town, Wabano, Minwaashin Lodge, and the Odawa Native Friendship Centre’s Bannock Bus).

[Click here to see ICCCASU Survey on panhandling.](#)

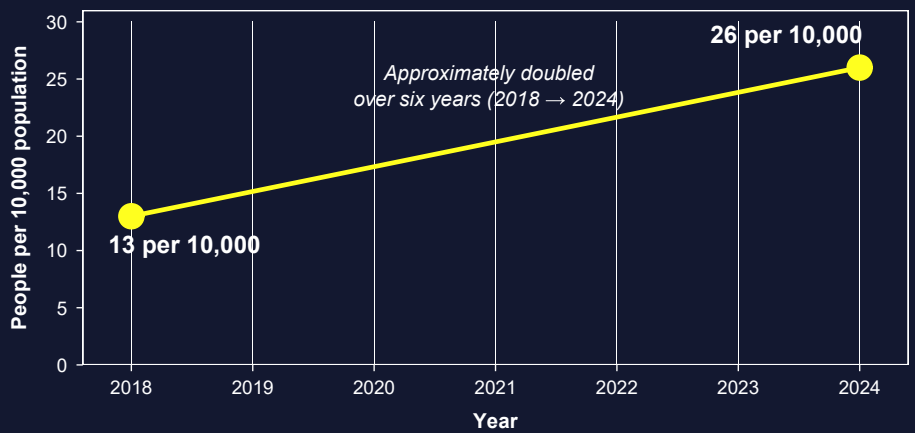


National Context

Building on this perspective, Dr. Ian Cooper, Director of Housing Policy Operations at Infrastructure Canada, expanded the discussion to a national scale. Drawing on recent data, he highlighted the significant rise in visible and unsheltered homelessness across Canadian cities and emphasized that this trend is driven by structural factors such as housing affordability pressures, income instability, and gaps in support systems. In this context, panhandling at urban intersections should be understood not as an isolated behavior, but as one manifestation of broader systemic strain.

Rate of homelessness in Canada has approximately doubled

Estimated rate per 10,000 population, nationally coordinated Point-in-Time counts



Source: Infrastructure Canada — Point-in-Time counts (presented by Dr. Ian Cooper, ICCASU Roundtable, 30 April 2026).

01 Rate of homelessness has approximately doubled.

Across 87 Canadian communities, the national rate has approximately doubled, from 13 to 26 per 10,000 population, between 2018 and 2024.

2x

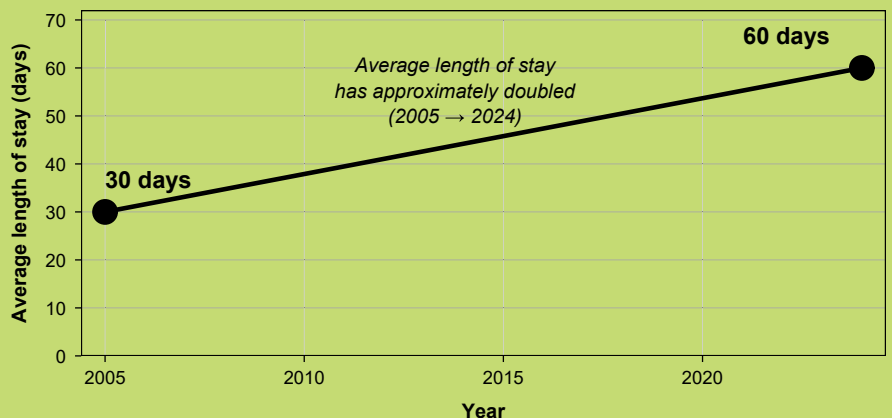
02 Chronic homelessness is now the dominant pattern.

Among 2024 Point-in-Time respondents, 83% reported chronic homelessness, more than four in five of those enumerated.

83%

Average shelter stays in Canada have approximately doubled

Average length of stay in emergency shelters, days



Source: Infrastructure Canada — National Shelter Study (presented by Dr. Ian Cooper, ICCASU Roundtable, 30 April 2026).

A Global Lens

Intersections as Diagnosis, Not the Problem

Douglas Ragan
Managing Director, Turning Tides

The discussion was further enriched by an international perspective. Mr. Douglas Ragan, Managing Director of Turning Tides and former UN-Habitat expert, joined the session online and offered a more deeply contextualized analysis based on his research in Nairobi and long-standing experience working on homelessness and informal urban economies. Rather than viewing panhandling as an isolated behavior, he situated it within a broader “hustle economy,” where individuals navigate multiple informal survival strategies in the absence of stable income and social protection. In this context, panhandling represents only one position along a wider spectrum that may include street vending, waste collection, or casual services, all shaped by structural constraints such as unemployment, exclusion from formal systems, and limited access to support. He emphasized that intersections are not randomly chosen locations, but function as strategic spaces where visibility, traffic flow, and opportunity converge—what he described as a “captive audience.” At the same time, he cautioned against misinterpreting visibility as the problem itself, noting that: “the intersection is not the problem—it is a diagnosis.” This framing shifts attention from regulating behavior in public space to understanding the structural and historical conditions that produce it. Drawing on global comparisons, he further argued that enforcement-based responses tend to relocate rather than resolve the issue, and that meaningful solutions must engage with underlying drivers such as income insecurity, housing instability, and systemic exclusion. His intervention provided a critical bridge between local observations and global patterns, reinforcing the need to situate Canadian experiences within a broader international understanding of urban inequality and survival strategies.



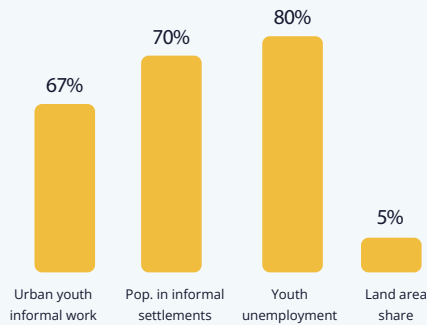
Global South perspective

Douglas Ragan
 Managing Director, Turning Tides

Drawing on three decades on Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and fourteen years at UN-Habitat, Ragan presented a Nairobi-anchored Global South case. Of the city’s 4.4 million residents, 60-80 per cent live in informal settlements that occupy less than five per cent of the land base. Mathare alone holds more than 300,000 people in three square kilometres.

Begging sits within a continuum of informal-economy practices: hawking, waste-collection, motorbike (boda-boda) work, music, acrobatics. Ragan’s framing: “the physical intersection is a diagnosis, not a pathology.”

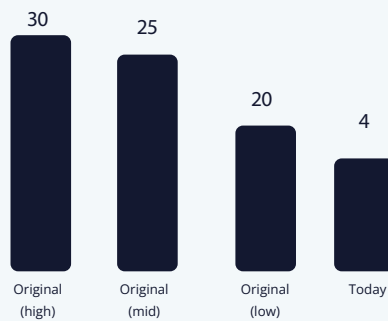
Nairobi: informal settlement and youth indicators (%)



USD \$0.50–1.00
 estimated daily panhandling income in Nairobi.

80%

Vancouver Downtown Eastside, area in square blocks



20–30 → 4 blocks

Vancouver Downtown Eastside compressed over a generation.

-84%

Mathare residents in 3 km² (Nairobi).

300K

Street-connected individuals in Nairobi.

15K

Panel Discussion

A Dynamic Exchange Across Cities and Experiences

The panel discussion that followed developed into one of the most dynamic moments of the roundtable, bringing together perspectives from different cities and professional backgrounds. Moderated by Mr. Fleury, the exchange included Ms. Kaite Burkholder Harris (Executive Director, Alliance to End Homelessness Ottawa), Mr. John Heckbert (Executive Director, Operation Come Home), Ms. Sandra Clarkson (President and CEO, Calgary Drop-In Centre, joining online), and Mr. Douglas Ragan (online).

Rather than presenting a single narrative, the discussion unfolded as a layered conversation reflecting the complexity of the issue. Ms. Burkholder Harris highlighted how structural constraints—particularly social assistance frameworks and rising living costs—can push individuals toward informal survival strategies, while also noting changes in how people engage in street-based economies. Mr. Heckbert brought a frontline perspective focused on youth, describing how panhandling intersects with housing instability, social isolation, and the everyday realities of navigating limited support systems, including informal territorial practices that shape the use of space at intersections. From Calgary, Ms. Clarkson emphasized that many individuals who panhandle are not necessarily unsheltered but are precariously housed, relying on panhandling to cover basic needs such as food, transportation, and medication, thereby challenging simplified assumptions about homelessness. Mr. Ragan, drawing on his international experience, connected these observations to broader global patterns, reinforcing the idea that local manifestations of panhandling reflect wider structural conditions.

Together, these contributions created a rich and nuanced exchange, illustrating how individual experiences, policy frameworks, and urban systems intersect in shaping the realities observed at intersections.





Conclusion

Beginning a Conversation That Must Continue

Throughout the roundtable, a shared sentiment gradually emerged among participants. Panhandling at urban intersections is increasingly visible and widely recognized as an issue, yet it remains difficult to address—not only in terms of policy, but also in terms of public conversation. Many people feel concerned or unsettled when encountering it, yet are uncertain about how to interpret it, how to respond, or even how to speak about it.

In this sense, the roundtable did not seek to resolve the issue, but rather to open a necessary conversation. It created a space where different sectors could come together, share perspectives, and begin to articulate the complexity of a challenge that is often acknowledged but rarely fully discussed. As such, it represents an important first step. Looking ahead, participants expressed strong interest in continuing this dialogue, expanding engagement across sectors, and exploring practical pathways for action. This initiative is only the beginning, and its success will depend on sustained collaboration, broader participation, and continued support.

By grounding the discussion in both evidence and lived experience, and by connecting global insights to local realities, the roundtable laid the foundation for a more informed, balanced, and humane approach to one of the most visible challenges facing contemporary cities.



Acknowledgements

We would like to sincerely thank all participants, both in person and online, for their time, engagement, and valuable contributions. We recognize that everyone has demanding schedules, and your presence reflects a shared commitment to addressing an important issue affecting our cities and communities.

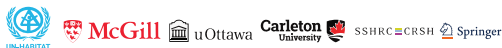
We would also like to acknowledge **Ms. Luisa Medon**, Project Director, for her hard work and dedication in supporting the organizing committee in delivering this initiative. Her efforts, together with those of a volunteer team composed of graduate and undergraduate students from the University of Ottawa, were essential to the success of this roundtable.







International Council on Canadian, Chinese and African Sustainable Urbanization



CARING FOR INDIVIDUALS SEEKING ASSISTANCE AT URBAN INTERSECTIONS

Thursday, **April 30**, 2026
1:00 PM (ET)

Room **FSS4004**
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Ottawa
Ottawa, Ontario

ROUNDTABLE
Bilingual Event | Hybrid (In-person & Virtual)
University of Ottawa | ICCCASU Initiative
"Global Ideas – Local Solutions"



Objective

This roundtable aims to identify coordinated and evidence-based responses to visible homelessness and panhandling at urban intersections while balancing public safety, human dignity, and long-term prevention. Bringing together policymakers, researchers, community organizations, and practitioners, the discussion will explore panhandling as part of broader structural challenges – including housing affordability, poverty, mental health, and addiction – while also addressing intersection safety, public perception, and public-space governance.



OPENING REMARKS

- Dr. Cintia Quiroga**
Director, Research and Innovation, University of Ottawa
- Dr. Ian Cooper**
Director, Housing Policy Operations, Infrastructure Canada
- Stéphanie Plante**
City Councillor, Rideau–Vanier Ward, Ottawa
- Professor Huhua Cao**
Co-President, ICCCASU, Professor, University of Ottawa



JOIN ONLINE VIA ZOOM

Meeting Link: uottawa-ca.zoom.us/j/99030379465



Scan QR code to register



SETTING THE CONTEXT

- Professor Benjamin Gianni**
Vice-President, ICCCASU, Professor, Carleton University
- Dr. Ian Cooper**
Director, Housing Policy Operations, Infrastructure Canada
- Douglas Ragan**
Managing Director, Turning Tides, Garden Bay, British Columbia



MODERATOR & SPEAKERS

Moderator:
Mr. Mathieu Fleury
Professional in Residence on Housing Innovation Alex Trebek Forum for Dialogue, University of Ottawa Former Ottawa City Councillor

PANEL SPEAKERS:
Kaite Burkholder Harris, Executive Director, Alliance to End Homelessness Ottawa
Sandra Clarkson, President and CEO, Calgary Drop-In Centre
John Heckbert, Executive Director, Operation Come Home Ottawa

CONTACT:
Ms. Luisa Medon: lgome057@uottawa.ca
Miss Sajdah Hesham Hema: shema095@uottawa.ca
<https://icccasu.org/>

Let us keep on touch

Global Ideas, Local Solutions

ICCCASU is an international platform established in 2015 in partnership with UN-Habitat, dedicated to advancing sustainable urbanization by connecting research, policy, and practice. Over the past decade, it has developed into a recognized and credible voice in international discussions, with a growing global presence. With a network spanning more than 50 countries, it brings together scholars, policymakers, and practitioners, with a particular focus on Canada, China, and African contexts. By connecting diverse regional experiences, ICCASU fosters comparative dialogue and collaboration on shared urban challenges. Its guiding vision, "Global Ideas, Local Solutions," reflects a commitment to translating international knowledge into concrete initiatives at the local level.

Partners



CALGARY
DROP-IN
CENTRE



ROCHESTER HEIGHTS
COMMUNITY HOUSE



Contact

If you require additional information:
Ms. Luisa Medon,
ICCCASU Panhandling Project Director
lgome057@uottawa.ca

Miss Sajdah Hesham Hema,
ICCCASU Panhandling Project Coordinator
shema095@uottawa.ca

Contact ICCASU:
Email: icccasu@uottawa.ca
Website: <https://icccasu.org/>