**Homeless, Unemployed, and Surviving on Bitcoins**

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Jesse Angle is homeless, living on the streets of Pensacola, Florida. Sometimes he spends the night at a local church. Other nights, he sleeps behind a building in the heart of the city, underneath a carport that protects him from the rain.

Each morning, he wakes up, grabs some food, and makes his way to Martin Luther King Plaza, a downtown park built where the trolley tracks used to run. He likes this park because his friends hang out there too, and it’s a good place to pick up some spending money. But he doesn’t panhandle. He uses the internet.

The park offers free wireless access, and with his laptop, Angle watches YouTube videos in exchange for bitcoins, the world’s most popular digital currency.

For every video he watches, Angle gets 0.00004 bitcoins, or about half a cent, thanks to a service, called [BitcoinGet](http://www.bitcoinget.com/), that shamelessly drives artificial traffic to certain online clips. He can watch up to 12 videos a day, which gets him to about six cents.\* And he can beef up this daily take with [Bitcoin Tapper](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.bitcointapper&hl=en), a mobile app that doles out about 0.000133 bitcoins a day — a couple of pennies — if he just taps on a digital icon over and over again. Like the YouTube service, this app isn’t exactly the height of internet sophistication — it seeks to capture your attention so it can show you ads — but for Angle, it’s a good way to keep himself fed.

Jesse, 42, is on food stamps, but that never quite gets him through the month. The internet provides the extra money he needs to buy a meal each and every day. Since setting up a bitcoin wallet about three or four months ago, he has earned somewhere between four or five bitcoins — about $500 to $630 today — through YouTube videos, Bitcoin Tapper, and the occasional donation. And when he does odd jobs for people around Pensacola — here in the physical world — he still gets paid in bitcoin, just because it’s easier and safer. He doesn’t have to worry as much about getting robbed.

Jesse Angle isn’t your average homeless person. But he shows that bitcoin is changing the world in [more ways than you might imagine](http://www.wired.com/wiredenterprise/?p=47251). Some believe it could provide a major boost to the country’s [640,000 homeless](http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/snapshot_of_homelessness), not only in providing extra pocket change for those on the street, but by helping urban homeless shelters more quickly secure donations for hot meals, beds, and blankets.

Angle learned about bitcoin through [Sean’s Outpost](https://www.smore.com/feux-sean-s-outpost), a Pensacola charity that has raised about $32,000 through a program that solicits donations in bitcoins rather than American dollars. So far, it has received donations from 25 different countries, and this has bought almost 16,000 meals for Pensacola homeless.

“Bitcoin beats the shit out of regular money,” says Jason King, the founder of Sean’s Outpost. “We’ve resonated so well with people because it’s direct action. There’s no chafe between donation and helping people.” That could change, as [regulators in the U.S. put the clamps on the use of bitcoin](http://www.wired.com/wiredenterprise/2013/09/ebay_bitcoins/). But for now, in the world of the homeless, it reduces chafe in more ways than one.

**Bitcoin: The Great Equalizer**

Jesse Angle says bitcoins are harder to come by than spare change shared by people walking down the streets. But there are other reasons for him to go digital.

“It’s a lot less embarrassing,” he says. “You don’t have to put yourself out there.” And unlike panhandling in Pensacola, using an app like Bitcoin Tapper won’t put him on the wrong side of the law. This past May, Pensacola — where Angle has lived since April — passed an ordinance that bans not only [panhandling](http://www.cityofpensacola.com/sites/cityofpensacola.com/files/meeting_agenda/061313_ccmtg.pdf) but [camping on city property](http://www.pnj.com/article/20130524/news01/305240023/Camping%20ban%20passes%20despite%20opposition).

Yes, you need a smartphone to earn bitcoins — or some other device that gets you onto the internet. But the homeless carry mobile devices more often than you might expect. Angle’s homeless friends Chris Kantola and Paul Harrison also have phones, and they aren’t unlike people living on the streets in other parts of the country. At San Francisco’s Tenderloin Technology Lab — a nonprofit that provides the city’s poor and homeless access to computers — organizers say that many of its clients use personal phones to connect to the net. Android is the mobile platform of choice.

You also need power, but that’s not that hard to come by. When Angle and his pals run out of juice for their phones, they walk from Martin Luther King Plaza to the local Pensacola library, where they can plug into outdoor outlets on the side of the wall.

The bitcoin system could become an equalizer for the country’s homeless, a place where the stigma of living on the streets isn’t as pronounced. “Homeless people don’t like to raise their hands and say they’re different,” says Mark Horvath, an advocate for using the internet and social media to help end homelessness. “Nobody does.” In the bitcoin world, they don’t have to.

If you’re homeless, the great thing about bitcoin is that you can set up a wallet without an ID or a street address. And once you start filling this wallet, there are plenty of ways of converting bitcoins [into cash](http://www.wired.com/wiredenterprise/?p=47251) and food and other goods, all without identification.

After earning his money with apps like Bitcoin Tapper, Angle turns to another tool called [Gyft](http://www.gyft.com/), an Android app that converts his bitcoin reserves into gift cards for places like Papa John’s pizza. He can then buy a pie online, have it delivered, and share it with Kantola and Harrison.

The next day, his friends might return the favor. They too have their own bitcoin wallets. “We’re kind of the homeless geeks,” Angle says. “We all got laptops and smartphones.”

Comments:

[Spruce Cycle](http://www.wired.com/wiredenterprise/2013/09/bitcoin-homeless/) • [6 months ago](http://www.wired.com/wiredenterprise/2013/09/bitcoin-homeless/#comment-1052761067)

Currencies are NOT adopted from the bottom up. Currencies are a vehicle of control and are imposed by the powerful onto the powerless.

[Joaquim Ventura](http://www.wired.com/wiredenterprise/2013/09/bitcoin-homeless/) • [6 months ago](http://www.wired.com/wiredenterprise/2013/09/bitcoin-homeless/#comment-1052767364)

Tell that to the guys in prison using cigarettes as currency. The people using seashells all over Africa and Asia. Currencies are not a means of control, they are a means of exchanging value. To say that currencies are a tool of control is the same as saying water is a tool of control in desert regions. Currencies CAN be used for control and that is exactly what you have today, but a decentralized currency that nobody controls, cannot be used for control.

[TR1](http://www.wired.com/wiredenterprise/2013/09/bitcoin-homeless/) • [6 months ago](http://www.wired.com/wiredenterprise/2013/09/bitcoin-homeless/#comment-1052773344)

The problem is you're totally overestimating the value of cigarettes or seashells or whatever currency in creating meaningful trade like we see in the world economy today. You will not see a container vessel being loaded because some seashells traded hands.

[Frank Barcenas](http://www.wired.com/wiredenterprise/2013/09/bitcoin-homeless/) • [6 months ago](http://www.wired.com/wiredenterprise/2013/09/bitcoin-homeless/#comment-1052888373)

The value is in the eye of the beholder. It doesn't really matter if it's bitcoins, dollars or seashells. As long as both parties recognize the value of the currency, it's useful to them. As long as the guy with the container knows how to exchange bitcoins/dollars/seashells for whatever he wants, it's currency.

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Sure, but problems arise when you try to do this often or on a large scale when most people are using a different currency. Whatever the dominantly used currency is, people will peg the value of whatever alternative currency, be it shells, cigs, bitcoins, to that dominant currency. Case in point, the businesses that accept bitcoin are converting a substantial portion of their bitcoin revenue into dollars, because that's what they need to cover their operating expenses with.

One of the bigger issues facing BTC is volatility, which can just as easily happen with seashells or cigarettes if they're used on a wide enough scale(doesn't have to be globally or even nationally, just regionally) or for big enough trades.