Homelessness in Public Libraries: Perceptions and Proposed Solutions

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Introduction

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 established the definition of a homeless person as an individual who lacks a permanent night-time address or someone whose night-time address is a structure traditionally considered unsuitable for permanent human habitation. A 2011 study by the National Alliance to End Homelessness reported that there were over 630,000 homeless persons in the United States as of the end of 2009. Although homeless persons are typically more concentrated in urban locations and warmer climates (due to their lack of shelter), this subgroup of the American population is represented in every community; thus, homeless people are part of the potential patron group of every public library system.

As homeless individuals lose access to the traditional social safety net, many of them have come to rely on public libraries as a safe space to be able to spend a day, do research, interact with society, and achieve access to technology and other employment tools. Although homeless persons may be found using the resources of any library, the information needs of this patron group often falls primarily to public libraries; as such, the considerations of academic and special libraries falls outside the purview of this review. Instead, it will focus primarily on the public library as an institution's perspectives on homeless individuals, the identified service needs of the homeless, and a brief review of what services are currently being offered.

Summary

Homeless individuals and families are members of virtually every community in America (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2011). The American Library Association (2012) has professional guidelines that advocate for services to the chronically poor and homeless as part of its belief in access to library services for all people. However, this view is not universally held among library professionals. Instead, many LIS professionals view libraries as cultural institutions that have no place for the social outreach and welfare functions typically related to homeless outreach (Cronin, 2002;

Gehner, 2010). Despite this discomfort, however, many researchers have argued that homeless and

chronically poor persons are a deserving patron group that is traditionally underserved for a variety of

reasons including negative perceptions of the homeless community by library staff members (Grace,

2000), lack of access to library resources (Collins, et al., 2009), and a perception that the library is too

complicated or hostile for use by the homeless community (Defaveri, 2005; Yi Ling, 2009).

Despite these barriers to access, libraries play real and important roles in the lives of homeless

individuals due to the public library's importance as an information clearinghouse and as a public civic

space (Hodgetts, et al., 2008). Libraries serve as information gateways to resources available to the

chronically poor, and many of the entertainment, education, and employment gateway roles the library

fulfills for the larger community are equally applicable to the needs of the homeless (Hersberger and de

la Peña McCook, 2005). Many contemporary scholars argue that libraries must move away from

pejorative view of homeless individuals and must instead make them partners in the services offered to

them as has been done with other traditionally underserved groups (Grace, 2000; Terrile, 2009).

<div align="center">**Literature Review**</div>

The Homeless as Problem Patron

The contemporary conversation regarding the perception of homeless individuals by public

libraries mostly stems from Blaise Cronin's 2002 article "What a Library is Not" in *American Libraries.* In

this brief article, Cronin bemoaned the transformation of libraries into spaces that were not able to

police themselves due to an over-reliance on political correctness. Cronin particularly criticized the

overuse of the Tacoma Public Library by the homeless population that led to a ban on the entrance of

bulky objects, bed rolls, and other belongings when patrons entered the library. Cronin's main point

was that a library is primarily a cultural institution; as such, the use of it as a place for loitering for those

who have nowhere better to go does not equate to an adequate utilization of the library's purpose. He

advocated silencing this "disruptive minority," going so far as to proclaim that "a library is not a refuge

for the homeless." Cronin's views echoed the complaints of many library professionals: how can public

libraries serve their primarily middle and upper class supporters if they must also simultaneously be a

refuge for a disruptive, unsightly, and often unhygienic minority?

Cronin (2002) is not alone in this assessment. Much of the library literature labels the homeless

as problem patrons (Ferrell, 2009). Gehner (2010) reported that the response to Cronin's (2002)

American Libraries article was almost 3:1 in support of his complaints. However, Ferrell (2009) noted

that when patrons are described as being problematic as a group instead of as individuals, this

generalization can lead to stigmatization and a shifting of professional beliefs that these problem

patrons (in this case, the homeless) are less deserving of service or are generally more difficult to serve.

Additionally, even among those who wish to serve homeless library patrons, a form of compassion

fatigue can set in, leading to apathy in providing services to this community (Yi Ling, 2009).

Yi Ling (2009) defended library service to the homeless by classifying them not as problem

patrons but instead as a special user group and a symptom of larger social problems. Yi Ling also refuted

notions that homeless people were an especially disruptive patron group, noting that many of Cronin's

(2002) complaints about the smelliness and unruliness of homeless patrons could be applied to a variety

of patron groups that are still deemed to be worthy of full library service. Indeed, the mass of

contemporary literature made plain that it is often impossible to directly identify a member of the

homeless community (Ferrell, 2009; Woelfer and Hendry, 2009; Yi Ling, 2009); as such, the literature

advocated for the upholding of the agreed upon standard of equal service for all.

Dismissing service to the homeless community out of hand further contravenes the ALA's

commitment to service for all, most notably documented in the policy statement "Library Services to the

Poor." Instead of rejecting the homeless population as a problem community, the ALA embraced both

the elimination of all barriers to library services for poor people (including onerous fees and overdue

charges) and the establishment of hard-funded services in all libraries to support the needs of the poor.

This statement of purpose runs in opposition to Cronin's (2002) belief that libraries are not a haven for

the homeless; instead, rather, the ALA directly promotes access for this patron group.

Despite both a culture of scholarly literature and the dictates of social justice issued by many

professional organizations, Gieskes (2009) discovered that over 70 percent of library professionals did

not think libraries adequately served that poor; the same percentage of respondents also said that they

did not consult the ALA or its round tables for advice or resources in assisting the homeless and other

chronically poor patron groups. Gieskes advocated for an increased role of the ALA in advocating for

greater services for this patron group in order to overcome two of the primary hurdles to establishment

of service for the homeless and chronically poor: this patron group is often invisible and needs to be

marketed to in order to ensure that they will use library service, and more "typical" library patrons and

staff members do not always understand the importance of services to these communities, leading to

apathy or a hostility to establishment of new services.

Service Needs of the Homeless Community

Libraries can provide invaluable assistance to homeless persons. One primary need of the

homeless community is access to information about available community resources to help homeless

persons in their immediate and long-term shelter and support needs including job training programs,

food kitchen locations, affordable housing information, shelter locations, and connection to local

homeless advocacy groups (Defaveri, 2005; Woelfer and Hendry, 2009; Yi Ling, 2009). Indeed, libraries

have a major advantage over most service providers in that they typically have permanent spaces under

their own control that do not have to be shared with other groups. This transience of resources is a

major concern for homeless advocates as it diminishes information accessibility for an already baseless

homeless community (Woelfer and Hendry, 2009). However, libraries must actively leverage this

benefit because many homeless individuals do not understand how a library works, and they avoid the

space to avoid "feeling stupid" or being left out of yet another civic engagement opportunity (Defaveri,

2005; Muddiman, 2000). The perception that the library is stodgy and out-of-touch with the day-to-day

concerns of the poor curtails usage by this group (Defaveri, 2005).

A primary need of the homeless community is equitable access to library services (American

Library Association, 2012; Yi Ling, 2009). Although, as noted above, the homeless have many specialized

service and information needs, Hersberger and de la Peña McCook (2005) found that typical information

requests by homeless library patrons included employment, education, transportation, childcare, and

financial needs; in other woods, the exact same information requests of all patron groups living in the

complicated modern world. The homeless and chronically poor had many of the same needs as the

larger community, but their access to information to solve these needs was often greatly reduced

compared to other, more affluent community members (Hersberger and de la Peña McCook, 2005;

Muddiman, 2000). Yi Ling (2009) noted that homeless people were much more likely to have their

access curtailed due to the prejudice of library employees, and he advocated for libraries to educate

staff to avoid this inequity and to encourage library policies to be applied equally, regardless of a

patron's appearance or perceived social class. Grace (2000) remarked that due to the variance of

conditions that lead to homelessness, the impossibility of identifying a homeless person by look alone

makes any sort of socioeconomic profiling innately biased and unreasoned. Yi Ling's (2009) observations

echoed the earlier literature that noted that a primary obstacle to library usage by the homeless is the

need to feel comfortable in the library space (Defaveri, 2005) and that homeless individuals were more

likely to utilize library services when they could build a direct, positive relationship with library

employees (Hodgetts, et al., 2008).

Current Services Available

Currently, many public library services available to the homeless community are passive services

(Gehner, 2010). These offerings, such as the typical borrowing privileges of all patrons and lists of area

resources posted in a community resources, have been shown to fail to actively engage and address the

needs of homeless persons. Because of the internal yet strong prejudices against this group (Cronin, 2002; Gehner, 2010), homeless people often may avoid actively engaging with library professionals and services. However, this does not mean that homeless individuals prefer passive engagement; rather, homeless individuals expressed concern that they would be judged or ill-treated by library staff due to their inexperience in using library resources and the perception of their low socioeconomic status (Gehner, 2010). However, many libraries have begun seeking to actively engage this patron group with a variety of new offerings in an effort to discover what works best in library service to the homeless community (Hodgetts, et al., 2008). This involvement of the homeless community and its advocates in discussing the direction of library service is something that has been missing in the past and has led to a disconnect between needs and offerings that researchers hope will be rectified in the future (Hodgetts, et al., 2008)

Collins, Howard, and Miraflor (2009) discussed the current offerings of the San Jose Public Library's MLK branch towards the homeless community. They found that library services to the homeless worked best when the services removed the barriers that typically kept homeless individuals from utilizing them in the past. Issues such as lack of transportation, unpredictable shelter, lack of childcare services, and monetary concerns were all taken into consideration with the development of new services for the homeless primarily in the form of one-time workshops that served as dual opportunities to introduce homeless patrons to community advocates including social workers and lawyers. By removing these barriers to information, Collins, Howard, and Miraflor (2009) documented an increased usage by this target community. Their study echoed the conclusion of Woelfer and Hendry (2009): outreach to the homeless community is most successful when advocates leave traditional information spaces and meet the homeless on their own terms.

In addition to specialized library services inside the library building, many LIS centers and homeless advocates have begun taking library services to homeless shelter and other community

support services (Grace, 2000; Terrile, 2009; Woelfer and Hendry, 2009). These libraries have created

specialized collections for homeless families with small children to encourage childhood literacy (Grace,

2010) and have aided area homeless groups with organizing portable information directories (Woelfer

and Hendry, 2009). Although many library systems reject the notion of taking library service out of the

libraries, the proposals of many scholarly researchers suggest that some library service must move to

where homeless are located to provide adequate and increased service to them (Collins, et al., 2009;

Grace, 2010; Terrile, 2009; Woelfer and Hendry, 2009). For example, Terrile (2009) noted that many

school-aged homeless individuals attended school sporadically due to the requirements of their

nomadic existence. This led to a choppy educational experience that libraries sought to alleviate by

taking the library out of the building and meeting the needs of the homeless patron group where they

are through a combination of staff and volunteer services.

Personal Summary

One of the most important things that I think a future LIS professional must think about when

considering public library service are any potential prejudices that they might need to overcome.

Although I wish I was the sort of person who could say that they reacted perfectly equitably to all

people, I know this is not true. I have an internalized fear of homeless people because of the mass

stigmatization that this group has undergone in American pop culture. I have been trained my whole life

to view these individuals as deserving of aid, but at the same time, to also perceive them as dangerous,

manipulative, dirty, and possibly insane. When I begin offering library service to all people, such a

perception is completely unacceptable (as I personally believe it is unacceptable for a person to

stereotype any group of people). I undertook this review of contemporary literature on the subject in

an effort to let information, education, and new perspectives battle fear, misunderstanding, and

stereotypes.

Currently, the contemporary literature does not (and probably cannot) address a principle issue: honestly, how does the LIS community respond to the homeless? It seems like the writers making the most noise on this subject are the homeless advocates, but it remains to be seen whether their efforts have any effects on the larger LIS community. Too many libraries have smell or hygiene provisions on their books that specifically work to curtail the library privileges of the homeless and chronically poor. I fear that the apathy towards homeless engagement and service in the wider LIS community is due to the fact that the status quo need not defend itself when the affected party (in this case, the homeless) is so politically powerless. Libraries are undergoing compassion fatigue, and the budget and time constraints of over-worked public library staffs just cannot support specialized assistance to one more group. Thus, the homeless get left behind.

I know that I do not have the solutions right now, but I perceive that the problems affecting the homeless community are echoed through the problems facing library service to many underserved patron groups. As libraries consistently expand their offerings (into new media, new services, new digital offerings, databases, new research, new branch locations, new standards of library practice), the distance that those unfamiliar with library service must travel to become patrons becomes greater and greater. I fear that as this distance between current patrons and the knowledge required of potential patrons to become new patrons increases, libraries will see an ever-shrinking usage by these groups as they continue to find that libraries are focused on service to people unlike themselves. While this may not be true, this perception may radically alter patron bases in the future, and lead all underserved groups (whether they be homeless, non-English speaking, or anything else) far behind. Service for all cannot be just a catchphrase; it must be a way of existing.

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