The Homeless, Public Libraries, and Outreach Services

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Close your eyes and picture a homeless person. Many of us will visualize a man in dirty and tattered clothes, or a woman pushing a shopping cart with all her worldly possessions. Now, picture the homeless in the public library. Again, many of us will revert to the stereotypical images, and such persons do often avail themselves of the services of local libraries, if for nothing but a warm place to rest. In all probability, libraries serve a wide range of homeless persons, including families, children, runaway teenagers, and other single men or women whom librarians would not be able to identify as homeless because they do not fit the stereotypes. An even larger population of library non-users who are homeless and living in missions or shelters, using soup kitchens, or spending time in local day centers are prime candidates for library services via outreach programs. This article presents a brief history of homelessness in the United States, a discussion of the homeless and libraries, and an examination of the case for developing outreach programs for the homeless, the useful services needed by the homeless in outreach form, and times when outreach services are not appropriate.

A Brief Historical Background of Homelessness

Homelessness was trendy in the early 1990s. Hollywood celebrities and politicians participated in events such as Comic Relief and posed for photo opportunities while serving food at soup kitchens. No longer so often in the public eye except during Thanksgiving and Christmas, the homeless nevertheless are still among us and a part of everyday life in many cities.

Homelessness in the United States dates back to the Colonial period when colonists who were not pulling their own weight in their communities were put on a boat back to England or sent to another colony. This form of "Mayflower therapy" would be repeated in the early 1980s when cities tried to solve their homeless problems (and AIDS cases, too) by practicing "Greyhound therapy" in which indigents were given one-way bus tickets to another city. In the past, the numbers of the homeless have risen and waned in correlation to the economic health of the nation. After the Civil War the number of homeless males surged due to a lack of work opportunities and a wealth of job seekers; after World War I a segment of the population, most often young males, lived the "hobo" lifestyle. Such a choice of lifestyle, as explained by one social scientist, was attributed to men who, possessing a restless nature and a need for adventure, were viewed as misfits in society.[1] During the Great Depression, 1929 to 1939, large numbers of the American population became homeless. This period of homelessness is often perceived to consist of families and individuals who became homeless due to national economic disaster, not necessarily due to personal dysfunction, e.g., the Joad family from *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. After World War II the number of homeless individuals was reduced to the point where homelessness was almost nonexistent until 1980. During this period few persons actually lived on the streets, as cheap SROs (sleeping rooms only) were fairly plentiful in urban areas.

Several events occurred in the early 1980s that contributed to a sharp rise in homelessness. The Reagan administration's policy on deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill and funding cutbacks for subsidized housing; the gentrification of urban areas inhabited by the very poor where the SROs were typically found; and the breakdown of families due to divorce, chemical dependencies, and young, unwed mothers becoming heads of households — all contributed to the growing number of homeless people. Unlike previous periods of homelessness, this current period is not necessarily tied to the economy. In a relatively strong economy the number of homeless people may decrease, but the problem will not be lessened significantly under current government policies and societal practices.

Libraries need to understand that in many cities the homeless will be a segment of their user populations for years to come. Although seen primarily as a population using public libraries, the homeless also use academic libraries. Many students become voluntarily homeless, living out of cars, vans, and trucks to cut costs. Other students qualify as "hidden" homeless, living off of friends for short periods and moving frequently as they wear out

their welcome. In addition, some homeless persons register for courses, getting Pell grants to do so, mainly in order to gain access to the university computing services via the library, just like a great many "housed" students. Others simply wander in to use academic libraries, and it can be difficult to distinguish the homeless from students, especially during exam weeks (this is said only slightly tongue-in-cheek).

The focus of this article is on outreach services for the homeless sponsored by public libraries. Important factors must be discussed prior to examining outreach possibilities and the need for such services. This article will examine the problem of utilizing a homogeneous term for a very diverse population, discuss the concepts of "needs" and "use" and "service" in terms of libraries and the homeless, and then will focus on what the homeless need and how library outreach services can aid these segments of the homeless population.

An Examination of Terminology

The term "the homeless" is frequently used to refer to this large, diverse population, making it sound homogeneous. What most people who work with this population have discovered is that in order to engage in any meaningful discussion, research, or service development and provision, one must target a more focused sub-population of the homeless. An early study[2] categorized sub-populations of the homeless as single males, Vietnam veterans (a subgroup of homeless males), homeless single females (sometimes further categorized, like males, into age groups), homeless couples, runaway teenagers, and families. Race and ethnicity are other demographic characteristics used to further subdivide the homeless. Individuals may also suffer from substance abuse or mental illness. This has import for libraries considering services to homeless persons and requires a knowledge of local homeless populations and their particular subgroups.

Bias is an issue we as public service professionals must all confront. Inherent to the discussion of the homeless is the underlying perception of the "deserving" and "undeserving poor." Those who become homeless due to personal dysfunction or weakness, i.e. substance abuse problems with drugs or alcohol, divorce, or multiple teenage pregnancies, are viewed frequently as undeserving of government assistance. Homeless families, homeless children, and persons viewed as actively working to better their situations often are perceived to have "fallen through the cracks" or to have become homeless due to a malfunction of "the system" and are viewed as worthy of assistance. Such distinctions become important in how we view service development and provision to the homeless in libraries. Each of us needs to explore our personal attitudes and biases towards the homeless and why we hold such views.

How do we know which patrons are homeless and which are housed? Staff make assumptions based on stereotypes of dishevelment, poor personal hygiene, and long periods of library stays. This may mean someone is homeless, but it may not. In addition, the homeless status of other library users will not be obvious to staff since it is important to such persons to keep their homelessness hidden from others. Economic class should not be a factor in how libraries serve patrons: needs, especially information needs, ought to be the main issue.

Other terms must be clarified before outreach services can be discussed. These terms are "need," "information need," and "library use." In the past, library literature focused on the homeless as problem patrons, particularly in the wake of the Kreimer case in Morristown, New Jersey.[3] A "need" usually occurs when a person perceives that a problem exists and that some action must be undertaken in order to produce a beneficial outcome. An information need is when a person, using his or her own knowledge base, cannot make sense of new stimuli and thus must make sense of this new situation.[4]

Homeless library patrons and library staff often perceive "needs" and "needs resolution" differently. No one contests the rights of homeless patrons to use the library for typical user services. A homeless person who is interested, say, in finding Roger Maris's lifetime batting average is no different from any other library patron. Reading the daily paper is utilizing a library service regardless of the social status of the reader. The difficulty arises when the concept of "use" is interpreted more broadly. Often, the homeless need a warm, safe place to rest during the day and perhaps a place to wash in the restrooms, especially if a day shelter facility is not available. Often library staff do not recognize these as needs the library should accommodate, that such needs do not fit with proper "library use." Some libraries have promulgated policies that do not allow sleeping in the library. Other libraries have established policies that, if patrons do not follow established rules of "use," they may be requested to leave the facility. Such rules often are aimed at the homeless, creating a reason for asking them to leave if they are not reading, computing, looking up materials, etc. Sleeping or loitering are not considered library uses, but it is often what many of the homeless need. Often such policies are not implemented equally.

At an ALA conference in San Francisco in 1992, several sessions focused on the homeless and libraries. One librarian related that his library had a policy that staff should wake up anyone falling asleep in the library. The policy had been written in order to remove the homeless from the library. Such policies at best seldom work, and at worst are unethical. A problem arose when a local "pillar of the community," according to the librarian, would come in after having a few drinks at lunch and fall asleep while doing family history research. What to do? Invoke the policy equally and awaken the sleeping pillar of the community? In the end, the library chose to abolish the policy. Another librarian recounted that his library had considered a separate room for the homeless to use for reading and resting, but this idea was not implemented. Had the policy been implemented, it is doubtful the homeless would have utilized the new service.

The concept of "separate but equal" services to certain populations has never been a useful idea and is one that does not merit reviving. This is not to say that all public library policies concerning library use by the homeless are established in a similar manner. Library policy is sometimes the result of directors who believe in a social welfare mission for public libraries. Bob Trinkle, the retired director of the Monroe County Public Library in Bloomington, Indiana, requested that if during my dissertation research[5] I discovered that the local homeless needed more soap or towels in the bathroom, materials, or whatever, to let him know and he would provide it

Many of the information needs of the homeless involve social services. Local libraries may provide referrals to a specific social service agency (if the library knows which local agencies offer which services), but librarians often are unable to provide the specific infor-

mation. As an example, families receiving Section VIII (subsidized housing) certificates or vouchers need to know which landlords accept such documentation. Caseworkers and staff at homeless shelters frequently have this information, but libraries do not, and arguably ought not to have specific information that is better provided by other specialists.

While some homeless persons frequent public libraries, many others do not. In my dissertation study of homeless families, only two families out of twenty-eight cases used the library, and they both had used the library prior to becoming homeless. The other families, even though they articulated information needs relating to relationship problems, health problems, education problems, etc., did not consider the library as a source of information. These parents viewed family and friends as their primary sources of information, sources who often had no better resources than the homeless parents themselves. Service providers were seen as sources of information mainly if they were "nice" or "helpful." Many of the homeless parents did not view the majority of service providers as nice or helpful, unfortunately, and felt that the social service staff members would have been better information providers if they had had firsthand experience with homelessness.[6] The majority of homeless families were not regular library users, but this could have been a wonderful opportunity to introduce not only homeless families but others living in shelters, missions, spending time in day shelters, etc., to library services, and to provide outreach services to an underserved, but needy, population.

Outreach Services to the Homeless

The term "outreach" refers to any library efforts to provide information about the library and library services outside regular facilities. In the mid-to-late 1970s when I was doing my MLS studies at Indiana University and working in my first professional position as head of a branch library in Michigan City, Indiana, outreach services were at their peak. In Michigan City, for instance, Friends of the Library maintained revolving wire racks of recreational paperback reading in local beauty and barber shops, the bus and train stations, and most intriguingly, in the local bars. Other interesting examples of outreach services in libraries include bookmobile services to migrant worker camps and children's services provided to daycare facilities. Often, and unfortunately, outreach services are discontinued when budget cuts occur.

Why Outreach Services Ought to be Provided to the Homeless

Some may argue that as the homeless do not pay taxes they are undeserving of services. The truth is that many of the homeless do work and pay taxes: they are simply not making a living wage, even in today's good economy. In addition, many of the homeless have been taxpayers off and on for years, so this argument is not persuasive. Frequently, as a value-added service, libraries can raise funds for such outreach efforts through special fundraising campaigns and grants, or outreach services can be accommodated within the existing budget, utilizing volunteers.

According to most mission statements, a good public library examines the needs of its users. Service to underserved populations often is targeted in the planning process, so providing services to the homeless who do not come to the library can be justified within the library's own mission, goals, and objectives. Libraries may want to do a needs survey of the homeless to determine what is needed or wanted, keeping in mind the need to distinguish the sub-populations of homelessness. It is difficult, and possibly dangerous, to do this by approaching the homeless living on the streets. Such data collection is better conducted by going to missions, shelters, soup kitchens, or day centers and conducting the study with the assistance of persons experienced in providing services to the particular subgroup. My experience with many of the directors of shelters, soup kitchens, and day centers shows them to be very cooperative and understanding, and they are often excellent sources of information.

One practitioner's experience in providing children's services in family shelters resulted in the following list of needs:

- these children need special attention due to their homeless status
- these children often do not receive the attention they need
- these children need respect and a sense of being important to someone
- these children need stability
- these children need their lives enriched
- these children need to discover (or rediscover) their ability to make believe
- these children may have shorter attention spans than other children and need books that will aid in lengthening their ability to focus
- these children often want lots of affection and need lots of hugs
- these children need volunteers to prove themselves, (often they are suspicious at first)
- these children need the comfort and special bond that can be created when adults read aloud to children.[7]

In many ways, it takes very little time and effort to make a difference in the lives of these homeless children. Although my study focused on homeless parents, I spent a considerable amount of time playing with the children in the shelter. Often I would read them stories out of the few books in the family room. The shelter had a rule that the children could only play on the playground under adult supervision, and after lunch I frequently volunteered to serve as the playground supervisor. My experiences working with homeless children lead me to agree with the above-mentioned needs with one minor caveat. Given today's societal sensitivity toward child abuse, I recommend being careful giving out hugs and picking up small children. It is very difficult not to respond to a toddler walking toward you holding out his or her arms to be hugged or carried, but not all parents appreciate such a show of affection. I suggest taking cues from the shelter staff, checking a parent's reaction, or even asking for permission from the parent prior to dispensing hugs or picking up a child. Still, the benefits of working with

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homeless children are not simply a one-way transfer; the volunteer will reap many benefits as well. Such benefits include a sense of helping these children in need and a sense of doing something valuable for the community. Plus, while there may be some situations evoking sadness or helplessness, helping these kids can be a lot of fun.

The best outreach programs would be those focusing on a homeless subgroup, examining their specific needs, and provided in a place most convenient to the user. Such a place may often be a shelter but may also be a soup kitchen or day center where the data collection was undertaken. One problem that may arise with providing services to a shelter is that there are time limits for shelter stays, usually around 30 days for most family shelters. This may only allow for library services to be introduced, with the homeless encouraged to visit the local library branches for further services.

What Services Could or Should be Provided

Some libraries do provide outreach services to the homeless. Such efforts include providing materials for shelter library collections, the old standby of wire racks of paperback recreational reading, and providing story hours and other children's services in family shelters. A study of children's librarians in large library systems across the country identified the following outreach efforts to family shelters: storytimes, book deposits, library cards issued, homework help, programming, bookmobile service, and even library instruction.[8] From my study in family shelters in Indianapolis, all of the above would have been welcomed in any of the six facilities. In addition, some sort of computer assistance also would have been very welcomed. Such services could include donating equipment to the shelters, arranging for others to give hardware and or software to shelters, either connecting or raising funds to connect the equipment to the Internet, and teaching those in the shelters to use computers. The homeless parents I spoke with over a two-year period had a wide range of experience with computers. Many of the mothers had dropped out of school, but were young enough to have had some exposure to computers. One resident even said she hoped to get a job working with computers since she had enjoyed working with computers in high school. She had dropped out of school over seven years ago, however, so her knowledge of technology was woefully outdated. Some residents were functionally illiterate and had difficulties reading more than basic information. At the other end of the scale was one resident who had a degree in computer science and had access to the Internet through her work.

Some communities have developed local networks with multiple access points. Examples of this are PrairieNet in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois; Hooisernet in Bloomington, Indiana, and the PEN (Public Electronic Network) in Santa Monica, California, which was the first such local access system and has been available since 1989.[9] The PEN project has been particularly successful in connecting the homeless to city officials, and, as a result, policies have been promulgated which benefit this population which usually is represented by advocates rather than the homeless themselves. Of course, such networks provide this access if the users are able to read and have keyboard experience. Libraries could provide needed training. Children, as well as adults, would benefit from computer access in shelters where they could practice skills learned in schools or learn new skills using other educational software. A few games, mainly educational, would be a good addition. The shelter should develop use policies in order to allow for equal access. In my field work, there was usually only one phone for resident use and it was almost always in use with people waiting.

Other services may be useful and could be identified through analysis of data collected from the homeless populations with input from service providers. Once services are established, they must be evaluated and revised on a regular basis.

A wire rack of paperbacks in a mission is not a substitute for the full range of services offered in the library.

Why Outreach Ought Not to be Used (to Keep the Homeless Out of the Library)

In some communities, the presence of the homeless in the public library is perceived as a problem, and the solution to that problem is to keep them away from the library. A wire rack of paperbacks in a mission is not a substitute for the full range of services offered in the library. Referring the homeless to social service agencies simply to remove them from the facility is also unacceptable. I still have mixed feelings concerning the case in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where homeless persons took the majority of library seats making other patrons uncomfortable. The library director worked with other local downtown businesses and agencies to fund a day center where the homeless could shower, relax, sleep, make phone calls, and even use a small library collection donated by the library. Day centers are often wonderful facilities for the homeless, and if the intent was to better the lives of the homeless, good for the library. If the intent was to remove this class of users from the library, the effort is not so praiseworthy. The addition of a day shelter does meet the needs of those simply looking for a warm, safe place to nap during the day, but often the homeless were using the library before and after periods of sleep.

There are more questions than answers in how best to deal with the homeless in libraries and provide outreach services. Each community's situation will be unique; such an issue and possible resolutions to problems often are best resolved through establishing a coalition of interested or invested parties. The homeless *must* be included in the decision-making processes concerning policies and procedures that affect them.

Conclusion

The problem of homelessness in the United States is very complex. Speaking of the homeless as a homogeneous population is problematic. It is much more useful to focus on the varying sub-populations such as homeless men, women, teenagers, families, etc., and then develop services. As many homeless persons are not library users, outreach programs may garner a wider audience, an audience that really needs what public libraries offer to in-house patrons. Attitudes are important in determining how information providers behave towards the homeless, and ana-

lyzing our feelings and definitions of the deserving and undeserving poor is a useful exercise in exposing any previously unrecognized biases. We can then determine if these attitudes are preventing us from serving a specific class of users, which is contrary to the *ALA Code of Ethics*.[10]

Outreach services to the homeless may best be accomplished through providing these services via established facilities frequented by the homeless — shelters, missions, soup kitchens, or day centers. Some sort of van/bookmobile is another option, but safety may be a concern and local experts would best be able to answer such questions.

Some homeless persons are frequent library users, others have been in the past and have lost their way, and others have yet to learn of the potential value libraries may offer them. Some homeless persons are not interested in libraries at all, nor will they be. I encourage students to substitute the term "challenge" for the word "problem." I encourage librarians to refer to "the challenge of dealing with the homeless as library users" and not to "the problem of the homeless in libraries."

References

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[3] Phillip J. Morin, III, "Why Kreimer Can't Read: Striking the Proper Balance Between Library Access and Problem Patrons in *Kreimer v. The Bureau of Police*," *Rutgers Law Review* 46 (Summer, 1994): 1845.

[4] The author uses Brenda Dervin's definition of information needs. See Brenda Dervin, "An Overview of Sense-Making Research: Concepts, Methods, and Results to Date," (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communications Association, Dallas, Texas, 1983).

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[6] Ibid.

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[8] Frances Smardo Dowd, "Homeless Children in Public Libraries: A National Survey of Large Systems," *Journal of Youth Services* 9 (Winter 1996): 155-66.

[9] Everett M. Rogers, Lori Collins-Jarvis, and Joseph Schmitz, "The PEN Project in Santa Monica: Interactive Communication, Equality, and Political Action," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 45 (1994): 401-410.

[10] Article I of the *ALA Code of Ethics* states: "We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources, equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests." Article VII states: "We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representations of the aims of our institutions and the provision of access to their information resources." *ALA Code of Ethics* <http//: www.ala.org>.