LOOK FOR THE HELPERS: PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND THE HOMELESS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Look for the Helpers: Public Libraries and the Homeless: A Literature Review

I wanted you to have a narrative to accompany my presentation. My name is Kellian
Clink and I have been a librarian for 34 years, 2 of them at a public library in Geneva, Illinois. I
love coming to PNLA every year and try to concoct something that would be of interest to you. I
am from Wyoming so I love coming West every year and will miss being with you in person this
year.

Last year, everyone was talking about the homeless in their libraries so this year, I
thought I would outline some of the findings from research articles in our field, after briefly
noting the staggering number of counted homeless in the PNLA regions, and a brief outline of
some of the reasons for homelessness. Librarians serve the homeless and of course can advocate
for more affordable housing, more mental health and substance abuse services, but in the
meantime, they will be encountering the homeless in their libraries as we reopen. The salient
issue is the navigating between wanting to be a helper and wanting to make sure your library is
an inviting space for all (Geisler 2019). I had hoped for this to be just a jumping off point for a
rich conversation, but then there was Covid. I know in Geneva's public library, which was
situated in a very prosperous community, we were still scratching our heads about how to keep
the library inviting to our patrons while keeping the homeless from getting naked and washing
up in the bathrooms next to the children's area. It's a dilemma.

Defining who the homeless are is complex and fraught (Muggleton, 2013) and may
include those staying at shelters, couchsurfing or sleeping rough, to name a few situations. Also,
demographics are governed by local conditions. When there are tent cities across our country and
with Covid potentially causing a tsunami of increased homelessness, I thought I would look at

our professional literature. I don't have a role in this, just wanted to offer up the recent literature.

The most recent statistics I could find for the PNLA areas:

Alaska: 2019 --1907
Alberta: 2014—6663
British Columbia: 2018--7,655
Idaho 2017: 2,037
Montana 2016: 2,060
Oregon 2018: 15,800
Washington 2019 21,621

This narrative will outline findings from big general studies, those that looked at services

for special populations, look at the sticky area of policies and codes of conduct, glance at the

articles that have studied social workers in the library, and touch on one homeless person's cry in

the wake of Covid.

Covid has resulted and will result in more homelessness, a study by a Columbia economist

suggesting a possible 45 percent increase (Oreskes 2020), a tsunami of homelessness.   When

Eugene, Oregon, for just one example, is opening "three temporary shelters in the parking lots of

the Amazon, Peterson Barn and Hilyard community centers where people can camp in tents or

vehicles (Scalpone 2020, Apr 23) there's a problem. There are 102 encampments in the Twin

Cities in Minnesota for the homeless (Cashman, 2020). As an article in the *Daily Beast* asked,

"Will coronavirus make America finally care about the homeless? Suddenly it's a lot harder to

pretend hundreds of thousands of people don't exist" (Nelson, 2020). The reasons and

demographics are touched on in several resources, though every individual's path is their own.

Big picture issues include the lack of affordable housing (Zaru, 2020). To name but one example

in Seattle, rent increased by 57% in 6 years (Seattle.Gov); Closure of single room occupancy

housing (Rukmana 2020); deinstitutionalization (Rukmana 2020); substance use disorders

(Rukmana 2020), poverty (Rukmana 2020); and long term impact of evictions (Harding 2017) all

play their part. Some of the demographics that might or might not be true in your library's

service area: low educational levels, LGBTQ status, race (African-American youth were

especially overrepresented, with an 83% higher risk of having experienced homelessness in MN)

(Gibbert-Kline 2018) ; veteran status (Pressley 2017); and in Canada, " Urban Indigenous

Peoples experience homelessness at a disproportionate rate and make up a significant percentage

of people experiencing homelessness in cities. Research shows that Indigenous homelessness in

major urban areas ranges from 20-50% of the total homeless populations in Canada" (Homeless

Hub). One solution is Housing First which is cheaper. "A Housing First initiative for people with

mental illness undertaken in five Canadian cities — show that the current system costs three

times more than affordable housing with key supports. A 2019 Toronto Life story broke it down:

about $60,000 per person per year in the current system vs. $22,000 in permanent housing."

(Braun, 2020)

Articles I studied came from a search of the library literature, along with Google Scholar

and results from a Google Alert. Most studies were performed in the US or Canada. The values

of the public library were well stated in a guest editorial in the Edmonton Sun:

> In response to a negative piece by Lorne Gunter, discussing, in part, companies having to "hire extra security to keep library "patrons" from harassing people coming and going to offices, shops and cafes," Pilar Martinez wrote a piece in the *Edmonton Sun* that sums it up nicely:

> "Edmonton Public Library works to help at-risk Edmontonians through literacy, education, skill-development, social connections, housing and social support.

> Libraries are one of the few public spaces in our city that are truly open and welcoming to all. This includes our vulnerable neighbours who find refuge, hope and opportunity through the public library. Because of the positive impact of this work EPL was awarded a 2015 American Library Association Presidential Citation for the program and has presented both nationally and internationally on the service.

> Indeed, public libraries across North America are bearing a huge burden and doing more than their fair share in supporting those in our community with the highest needs. Rather than blame the public library and homeless individuals for society's woes,

it would be more useful and productive to acknowledge the complexity of poverty and homelessness and contribute to the creation of innovative solutions. For EPL's part, we are incredibly proud of our services to ALL Edmontonians, and we will continue to be a place of solace, warmth and understanding for our city's most vulnerable and other Edmontonians" (Martinez, 2020)

On the flip side of value, there is always the threat. Of not providing a place of solace to the homeless--"When poverty and homelessness are considered on a community level, impacts such as the financial costs of poverty on the whole community, and costs in terms of physical infrastructure, culture, social inclusion, healthcare, are apparent. These costs reveal the erosion of social fabric, where the safety, health, and overall wellbeing of a community is threatened when cycles of poverty are unaddressed." (Hill & Tamminen 2020) and of course, when kids are experiencing the erosion of the social fabric, many of us are even more horrified. Some of the young people in a study of LGBT teens talk about the library as "the safest place to be. It's safe from the outside world." The research continued, "Although it was dangerous living on the streets, the youth did not talk much about this. There were references to feeling safe at the drop-in center or at the Library, but there were not many stories about the risks they encountered daily. Karter, Avery and Zion did mention friends who had died, and Karter made a connection to this and being survivors" (Winkelstein 2019, 204).

General

Both the American Library Association and the Canadian Librarian Association advocate for services for all patrons. ALA statement about serving the poor has 20 points, including staff training about serving the poor, advocating policy in a more general way that supports people who live in poverty or are homeless, and "promoting the review of public conduct policies and administrative procedures to ensure they are not creating unintentional barriers to people experiencing poverty." (ALA) Public libraries are in a unique position to

understand the issues presenting themselves in a community for the homeless and others (Richter et al, 2019). One social worker writes about the library as a protective factor, likening it to others. "Protective factors include growing up in a two-parent household, consistent access to healthy food, educational and professional opportunities, and little to no transportation challenges. Protective factors are resources, relationships, and opportunities in an individual's life that mitigate risk. (Lloyd, 2020). The library's another factor, Lloyd argues. Depending on the location of the library, there may be a significant portion who are homeless. One study of six branches in a large city in Western Canada found that "most (77%) library users live in stable housing, but a sizeable number 22.2% confront unstable housing or are homeless." (Richter et al 2019, 434). In Philadelphia, at the Free Library, Morgan et al wrote, "Our interviews suggest, however, that libraries are disproportionately frequented by vulnerable populations, including those experiencing mental illness, substance use, and homelessness, as well as recent immigrants and children" (Morgan et al 2016, 2031). One study of about 60 librarians indicated that they had no training to help or knowledge of resources but offered up empathy and a willing ear and would be happy to have training to better understand referral resources (Anderson, Simpson, & Fisher, 2012). The homeless come to the library sometimes because of proximity to shelters and bus routes. They fear being kicked out, so respond to directives to change bad behaviors. (Geisler 2017). Although only 4 homeless persons were interviewed, the results indicate that in addition to using the library as a place, these patrons appreciated catching up on the news, using the genealogy databases and reading for entertainment. The librarians indicated barriers might include needing an address for a library card and judgmental attitudes of some librarians although patrons didn't express this. In fact, one interviewee said, in response to the question "What about the staff, are they nice and helpful?" Homeless Participant B replied: "Yes, they're

awesome." He further explained that this had been his experience in libraries throughout NZ:
"Yeah, they're all really good. When I was living in Auckland, I was quite scruffy, and I'd go
waltzing up, and they didn't judge me!" (Dowdell and Liew 2019, 4th page)

Rules

What ALA recommends is "promoting the review of public conduct policies and
administrative procedures to ensure they are not creating unintentional barriers to people
experiencing poverty."(#20 of ALA) The guru of homelessness and public libraries Ryan
Dowd (http://www.homelesslibrary.com/) recommends having n minimum number of
rules, but some being absolute (red) and some being breakable if common sense dictates
(blue) rules. (Dowd, R. J. 2018). The only issue might be with the court's ruling about
public libraries in Kreimer v. Morristown. Policies must conform to standards of
reasonableness, and not exhibit vagueness or overbreadth (Geiszler 1998). I will leave it to
the legal scholars to work on that. Some of rules outlined by Geisler in an article in *Journal
of Access Services* include:

> "All bags and other containers must fit completely under a library chair."
> Several libraries mandated "no sleeping" rules and "proper attire," the
> latter of which included, but was not limited to, 'shirts and shoes
> required.' Nearly all code of conduct policies included an injunction
> against harassment, intimidation, or threatening behavior. One library
> clarified these behaviors in specific terms—'Persons may not behave in a
> rowdy manner, stare at another person, follow another person about the
> building, play audio equipment so that others can hear it, sing or talk
> loudly, use profane or abusive language, or behavior in any manner that
> can reasonably be expected to disturb others.' Three libraries referenced
> 'inadequate personal hygiene' as interfering with the use of the library by
> others. (Geisler, 2017 190).

> One study described the discrepancies, including the example babies can be smelly

and noisy and their prams are large and are allowed but homeless folks are can be smelly

and their belongings are bulky and not allowed. (Winkelstein 2019, 205) Sleeping is seen

as a major problem and policies were examined in Zhang & Chawner 2018.

Programs

Muggleton (2012) wrote an essay that admonishes librarians not to 'other" homeless

people and unintentionally alienate them. "It is also important to be mindful of the fact that a

person's experience of homelessness will be heavily influenced by the initial reason or reasons

for them becoming homeless, as well as by the duration of their homelessness "(10), He urges

librarians to think about their core library goals and fulfill them. He writes, "An excessively

simplistic perspective in this regard is likely to lead to ineffective solutions not only for the

reasons detailed above with respect to "otherness", but also because they will address themselves

only to one section of the homeless population. Moreover, there is significant potential to

patronise and alienate people with overly simplistic or prejudicial attitudes, even if they would

otherwise benefit from the initiatives in question" (Muggleton 2012, 13).

Farrell reported on a program in Minnesota to work with homeless youth. The

population has "glaring racial disparities, are overrepresented by LGBTQ youth, 9 of 10 have

experienced at least one Adverse Childhood Experience, including abuse, most have mental or

physical health issues and have experienced violence or exploitation. Staff at Minneapolis Public

Library teamed with a local nonprofit to provide youth who are homeless with access to

technology. The results include participants feeling they had stronger organizational and team

skills, understood the writing skills needed to write a resume and cover letter and "a sense of

safety, stress relief, support, hope and pride in their community." (Farrell 2018) Winkelstein in

Tennessee worked with LGBT youth and public librarians. Highest need from library staff

perspective was training about available services for the kids and a working knowledge of

referral resources. One of the librarians interviewed talked about her feeling that she wasn't keeping the staff safe because of the lack of knowing who to call (Winkelstein 2019)

Interviews with homeless people indicated their surprise and dismay with librarians' lack of medical knowledge, "Participants expressed concern that library staff seemed unprepared for medical emergencies. "I'm not asking them to be paramedics," explained one participant. "Just … understanding some of the types of diseases they may come across" (Richter et al, 2019, 437). Health educators and librarians can successfully team up. Librarians report often (80 percent) helping patrons with all kinds of health information and can benefit their homeless patrons by having a basic list of resources such as free or low-cost care health care, transportation services, as well as basic health information about common conditions affecting the homeless. (Mi, Stefaniak, & Afonso 2014).

Social Workers at the Library?

There are arguments to be made for housing social workers in the library. Just as libraries sometimes create satellites in community centers to be where their patrons are, the people seeking social services often end up at the library, because of its proximity to homeless shelters, its central location in many towns, or just because it is a place that is regarded as safe, unthreatening, clean, with facilities such as air conditioning/heat, bathrooms, drinking fountains, and computers. If a social worker is housed in the library, they can help the homeless finding housing, health services, transportation, etc. and free librarians to do their work with collections and readers advisory, circulation, and whatever programming is on offer to community members.

Given the library's role in the provision of computers to access government services, public libraries can address the digital divide by providing social workers. A study by MSW

students demonstrated the need for the homeless, immigrants, as well needs of school-aged

children, and résumé building that were needed and could be provided by a social worker (Kelley

Riggleman, & Navarro 2017). A study done in Mississauga, Ontario looked at providing

training to staff, develop programing, and create a community hub in addition to having the

library be a place of respite. The program resulted in an uptick in library cards, use of housing

services, shower passes, food bank referrals, job search assistance, and e-government help. It's a

three way win situation to have a social worker in the public library…librarians can focus on

their primary roles while being able to direct patrons to appropriate experts but gain knowledge

about local services, social workers have a ready-made hub where their clients would be found,

and the clients get easier access to the services they need. (Hill & Tamminen, 2020)

While public libraries have been heroic through the pandemic, providing wi-fi in its

parking lots and eBooks to those with the technology to access them, their space for the

homeless has been irreplaceable– One man who is homeless in Los Angeles had this to say:

> "We aren't locked down; we are locked out. Locked out of libraries, McDonald's, Starbucks, community centers, gyms, you name it. We all used to hang out at this Coffee Bean, charging our stuff and using the internet. Now we must find one place to hang out, another place where we can charge our stuff, ANOTHER place to get internet."

> Over the last several weeks Bumdog set out to capture how his life and the lives of those around him changed due to the coronavirus pandemic. When speaking on the reality of being homeless during a pandemic Bumdog has this to say: "People are told to stay home and not go anywhere. And if you don't have a home, stay where you are and die. And try not to cough on anyone in the process" (Sanchez 2020, May 15).

The studies about the public library and people are homeless are valuable, if nothing else,

just because they reassure us that we're not the only ones wrestling with the issues. Most writers

in passing note the difficult dilemma…how to be welcoming and accessible for everyone when

the presence of the disadvantaged in our communities may seem and even be a threat to others in

our libraries. While we of course can advocate for affordable housing and for a stop-gap measure, day centers where folks who are homeless can rest, do laundry, take a shower, and take care of all the daily chores that we take for granted. Post Covid, there may very well be a huge increase in the number of homeless in our communities.

I hope the articles that follow will help public librarians get some ideas to bring to your staff, your governing boards, your communities. What I discerned from reading them, and I fully realize I don't wrestle with these issues every day can be summarized. Librarians are conflicted. Safety is a priority, and the priority is keeping our libraries safe for the staff and the visitors. One study included the role of a security officer, which helped take the pressure off the librarians to some degree. Regulating behaviors is difficult and in the U.S., there are laws that govern how regulations must be written. Regardless of the law, rules and regulations must be enforced by someone and that someone must feel that they are written in such a way that they can guide enforcement fairly without ambivalence. We should concern ourselves with understanding the needs of the patrons we serve, including the homeless, and our programming should reflect that, whether it is assistance with health information, job hunting, or readers' advisory. I was struck by the interviews from New Zealand, where the patrons felt like they could find their own aboriginal roots at the library.

Librarians in many of the studies expressed a wish to get training of all sorts: on local services, de-escalation and nonviolent crisis intervention, how to talk to the homeless and the patrons offended by the presence of the homeless. Some of the recommendations that made sense to me was having the library have official communication channels with social service agencies…so they have a current understanding of resources and they can informally do pattern recognition to share with municipal officers about trends they are seeing with the people they

serve. Having a resource booklet and perhaps some time at library meetings for social service agencies to talk about how those in need access those services seems like a good idea and a strategy to make librarians feel more comfortable, with something in their pocket and a little bit of context from the social work providers.

I do hope the list of resources below are helpful, and perhaps can act as starting points for conversations in your libraries. They are divided roughly into the studies, statistical resources I consulted, and other articles. When Mr. Rogers remembered him Mother saying to look for the helpers, it was to find some kind of hope in the midst of tragedy and the homeless situation in both of our countries is an unspeakably deplorable tragedy.

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