The Homeless and Information Needs and Services

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***Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document

A reference colleague related the following anecdote. In the course of teaching a reference workshop she would hold up photos of users, and the attendees would provide a background profile for them. She showed them a photo of an older gentleman in a plaid flannel shirt with his white hair sticking out at odd angles. Every public librarian in attendance identified the user as a homeless man. Every academic librarian in the audience saw a professor emeritus.

Evaluating the economic status of a library patron using direct observation might result in correct estimates in some instances, but very wrong guesses in others. There is no material relevance to whether the library user who requests information concerning who won the World Series in 1961, for example, is homeless or housed. There are, however, environmental issues that surround the everyday life experiences of homeless persons that might prove useful when thinking about providing library services to the homeless.

The term "homeless" is problematic when we discuss information user groups. First of all, the homeless are not a homogeneous population. Homeless veterans, for example, might have very different information needs and service needs than homeless families. Providing information services that are most useful and thus most used, becomes a simpler task when target audiences are more defined and more specific. Different homeless groups have different information needs, but all users' information needs must be assessed individually. Second, there is a perceptual issue of "deserving" versus "undeserving" individuals of existing and often limited services that underpins all discussions on homelessness. This perception often translates into library attitudes of "worthy" versus "unworthy" users, particularly in a public library setting.

Facts about Homelessness

According to the Stewart B. McKinney Act, 42 U.S.C. § 11301, et seq. (1994), a person is considered homeless if he or she:

> lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence and . . . has a primary night time residency that is: (A) a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations . . . (B) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized, or (C) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.[1]

People become homeless for many different reasons (emphasis on the plural). Basically, poverty and a lack of shelter form the primary reasons. In many cases, individuals can resolve one life crisis, but the homeless most often have been dealt multiple crises including various combinations of mental health issues, substance abuse, domestic violence, loss of a job, loss of a loved one, loss of one's home, and so forth. Information needs are often tied to the reasons that one becomes a homeless statistic, and the local services that can be provided to help resolve these problems.

The question regarding the number of people who are homeless is a very difficult question to answer. Estimates range from a few hundred thousand to over three million. The time that one spends being homeless is a critical issue. The chronically homeless spend very long periods living on the streets or in substandard housing. Probably the largest number of homeless people could be categorized as experiencing "periodic" homelessness, in which various circumstances result in the loss of housing. Persons who lose their homes due to natural disasters or from relocating to a new area are considered "temporary" homeless persons. Finally, those classified as living in "total" homelessness are those who have not only lost their shelter but also suffer from a loss of other important social supports such as family connections or public assistance.[2]

Everyday Life Information Needs
In past research efforts, homeless persons have articulated several everyday life information needs. These needs include information about:

- Finances
- Relationships with others
- Childcare
- Housing
- Health and health care (for self and for others)
- Employment
- Education (for self and for others)
- Transportation
- Public assistance (for self and for others)[3]

Not all of the information needs of the homeless are best answered by public librarians. Libraries might not have the lists for local subsidized housing available, but librarians ought to be able to know where in the community such information is known (that is, information and referral).

It is important to note that when addressing some questions, there may be other important issues that must be recognized prior to providing the best, most useful information. For example, some of the homeless are seeking job information, but simply providing information on available jobs is not always enough. If public transportation does not stop near the place of work, then a list of jobs might be useless information. Sometimes homeless parents cannot accept a job that is available only on the night shift due to the lack of affordable or available childcare during those hours.

As noted above, it is not always the questions themselves that render the status of the inquirer important; the everyday context is often crucial to understand. A CEO and a homeless person who both need to find a new place to live are basically asking the same question. However, the

CEO will have many more options and thus seeks— and receives—much more information. And, often, there are many more information providers able and eager to provide that information to the CEO.

Providing Services to the Homeless

The primary issue facing service providers to the homeless can be summed up in one word: attitude. A decade of studying the homeless as an information-user population has frequently called attention to the subject of the attitude of the information provider. In one study, those who provided information in a friendly manner were often referred to as "friends." However, in many circumstances, the homeless were very sensitive to a feeling of "unworthiness" in the perception of the information provider. Practitioners and LIS students should be encouraged to review ALA's Policy on Library Services for the Poor (Policy 61 in the ALA Policy Manual). The policy states that libraries should strive to remove existing barriers to service access and to improve services provided, taking into consideration the information and services needs of poor people. Poor people, especially the homeless, are marginalized populations already denied or struggling for full participation in a democratic society, but libraries ought to be social institutions of inclusion, not exclusion.

Categorizing an entire class of people as "problem patrons" is outright discrimination. Inappropriate behavior is a legitimate reason for asking a user to leave the library, but this is a separate issue from the user's social status. Toddlers, who can be smelly and loud, are not in the library reading anything and are often asleep, but no one advocates that this is a problem patron group unworthy of library services.

The library literature is split on the issue of library services to the homeless. The ALA Code of Ethics advocates information access and service provision to everyone regardless of demographic or other attributes. Some in the profession disagree. Cronin expressed what others have also advocated when he stated that "a library is not a refuge for the homeless . . . . A disruptive minority is effectively preventing the majority of bona fide library patrons from exercising their rights."[4]

Again, it is not the fact that the person is homeless that ought to determine worthiness for service. Anyone who is disruptive ought to be asked to leave the library. However, it is very doubtful that Cronin and others would classify two- and three-year olds as a problem patron group. Policies need to be applied equally. Users and staff who are overly perfumed cause physical reactions in others. While this issue has been addressed in the library literature, few refer to those wealthy enough to douse themselves in fragrance as a problem patron group. Isn't this disruptive minority abridging the rights of others too?

And why can't a library be a refuge for the homeless? There have been many articles in the past concerning the library as a "sanctuary" where individuals have gained information that greatly improved their everyday lives. Articles in library journals and various newspapers and other popular press venues celebrate the gains that many homeless individuals have realized through their use of the public library. ALA president Carol Brey-Casiano believes that "libraries are a safe haven for the homeless across the country, regardless of their location," and that libraries are often organizations that can better the lives of homeless users.[5]

While the attitude of individual staff members is critical to the provision of library services, equally as critical is how policy is promulgated and implemented. Patron behavior policies that determine access to information need to be focused on behaviors that are specifically delineated and then equally enforced. If the policy states that users may not sleep in the library, the pillar of the community snoozing away in the local history room after having a little too much wine at lunch should be asked to leave along with the homeless person sleeping in the reference area. The question of unequal enforcement of policy is one that individual libraries must discuss on a regular basis. Continuing efforts to discuss such policy issues at the state and national levels are also an important goal.

Assessing Information Service Needs and Providing Needed Services
I have long advocated that students of public librarianship be very active in assessing information needs of any identifiable user group. This involves getting out from behind the desk and, as needed, getting out of the library. Asking users for input is always a good idea as well, such as interviewing potential users in homeless shelters and soup kitchens about their information needs. Questioning other local service providers for input might prove valuable as well. Think outreach. If your children's department provides story times at various locations around town, such as nursery schools and daycare centers, why not consider providing a similar service to local family homeless shelters? Mark lists the following needs of children in homeless shelters that can be met by a visit from a librarian:

- 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 the 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 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 [and professionals] to prove themselves.
- These children need the comfort and special bond that can be created when adults read aloud to children.[6]

Homeless children living in family shelters are a great example of a very deserving user population. Libraries can make a difference in these young lives. If cost becomes an issue, such endeavors are often ones that local organizations will help fund.

Being creative in other ways can also help provide information to the homeless. One nonprofit group in a northeastern state received a large donation of Tyvek plastic sheeting on which they printed up the location and contact information of where one could find local homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and other public service providers. This virtually indestructible material did not disintegrate in rainy or snowy weather, nor did it fade from sun exposure. Think creatively when placing information like this around town. While there are some fairly obvious places to display

this information, there are also fairly affluent areas where the "hidden" homeless reside. One eye-opening television newsmagazine feature focused on once-wealthy Beverly Hills women who were living in cars or episodically housesitting for friends. These women did not share their homeless status with their family or friends. Some of them spent a lot of time in the public library in the local history rooms, ostensibly doing research but often just finding a nice, climate-controlled environment in which to spend the day.

Conclusion

As a former public library director, I am well aware of the many challenges that staff members face in providing services to an extreme range of users. However, there is little utility in the identification of homeless persons as "problem patrons." The same can be said of classifying senior citizens, young adults, or others as problem users. Individual behaviors that are well identified are reasonable arguments for denying access to services. Although it can be difficult to provide day in and day out, a cheerful, helpful attitude goes a long way in making a homeless person's day. Conversely, the homeless are often on the receiving end of disapproving attitudes or worse, being treated as if they are invisible. As professionals, let us assess service needs in the context of a person's homeless environment while not making personal judgments of their situations.

References and Notes

1. National Coalition for the Homeless. Accessed Nov. 20, 2004, www.national-homeless.org. This site has helpful information on many aspects of homelessness.

2. Leanne G. Rivlin, "Home and Homelessness in the Lives of Children," in *Homeless Children: The Watchers and the Waiters,* ed. N. A. Boxill (New York: Haworth, 1990), 5–18.

3. Julia Hersberger, "Everyday Information Needs and Information Sources of Homeless Parents," *The New Review of Information Behavior Research* 2 (2001): 119–34.

4. Blaise Cronin, "What a Library Is Not," *Library Journal* 127 (Nov. 15, 2002): 46.

5. Claudia Assis, "Homeless Find Safe Haven in the Public Library: 'It's like a school,' Says Day Laborer, Homeless 'off and on' for Past 7 Years," *The Herald-Sun* (Durham, N.C.), Jan. 22, 2004, final edition.

6. Darryl L. Mark, "Cambridge Public Library Outreach," *Journal of Youth Services* 7 (Spring 1994): 155–66.