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Connecting the many with the few: How public libraries can be more inclusive spaces for people experiencing homelessness

Abstract

The term “homeless” often conjures an image of someone living on the street, shabbily dressed and dirty. Definitions vary, but they’re all based on the fact that homeless people are without a permanent home. This conception of homelessness doesn’t address the complexity of the lives people experiencing it lead. Drawing upon a body of work about the information needs and behaviors of people experiencing homelessness, I examine the types of needs that homeless people have and propose a multi-step service a public library can develop to help these patrons fulfill their basic, everyday, and high-level needs.

Keywords: Social exclusion, identity formation, everyday life needs, high-level needs, homelessness, libraries

Introduction

Let’s talk about the term “homeless.” In our collective imagination, the term often conjures an image of someone living on the street, shabbily dressed and dirty. Maybe they’re holding a sign and asking for money. Maybe they’re buried under blankets to stay warm on the sidewalk. The specific details that come to mind may vary, but our conceptions of who the homeless are and what they look like don’t typically stray too far from the above description.

This paper considers the state of homelessness in the United States, but it is, of course, a global problem. According to the United Nations (UN) Commission for Social Development, homelessness has been on the rise over the last 10 years, and in 2020 it was estimated that 1.6 billion people live in “inadequate housing conditions,” and about 15 million people are “forcefully evicted each year” (United Nations Resolution on Homelessness, 2020). Due to factors such as infrastructure and economy, the lives of people experiencing homelessness in the developed world are probably different from the lives of the homeless in poorer countries. But in general, we view the homeless as a homogenous population, which is interesting since there isn’t one set definition used by organizations that are dedicated to helping the homeless.

Literature focused on the information needs and behaviors of people experiencing homelessness in the United States often cite the definition outlined in the Stewart B. McKinney Act, 42 U.S.C. § 11301, et seq.:

[...] the term “homeless” or “homeless individual” or “homeless person”

[...] includes—

- (1) An individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and*
- (2) An individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is—*
 - (a) A supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill);*

- (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* (Office of the Law Revision Counsel, 2009, Sec. 11302).

The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) 2004 "Guide to Counting Unsheltered Homeless People" uses a similar definition to determine whether a "sheltered" homeless person or "unsheltered" homeless person can actually be counted as *homeless*. An unsheltered homeless person, according to HUD, can only reside in "a place not meant for human habitation" (pg.5), while a sheltered homeless person must reside in an emergency shelter or transitional housing. These definitions don't account for homeless individuals who stay with friends or other connections, sometimes referred to as "doubling-up" (Stennett et al., 2012, p. 54). They're strictly focused on where people sleep, which doesn't provide a clear picture of who the homeless are and how they go about their daily lives. These definitions are also exclusionary in another way: Since most "propertied" (Sparks, 2013) citizens typically work in an office outside of the home during the day, they would only be returning to their homes after working hours to sleep. So the definitions we use to establish policies to meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness are based on what separates these individuals from the propertied working class.

For most information scholars, the term "homeless" is problematic when discussing the information needs and behaviors of people within this group. Julia Hersberger (2005) is chief among these scholars, addressing how the term tries to simplify the complexity of individual experiences. Hersberger points out that a veteran who is homeless has very different information and service needs than a homeless family, even though some of their needs may be the direct result of their homeless status. But Hersberger also describes homelessness as a *spectrum* rather than a modifier (where a person is the object of homelessness) or, worse, a "noun" in itself (Elmborg, 2012). This means that homelessness is something people experience periodically, temporarily, or totally (Hersberger, 2005, p. 200), and its effect goes beyond not having a proper place to sleep at night. For example, someone experiencing "total homelessness" has lost all their social support and other connections. In this same article about the information needs of the homeless, Hersberger also points out a tendency for librarians to associate certain physical characteristics with people experiencing homelessness, which they use to observe and identify these patrons within the library (Hersberger, 2005, p. 199).

Hersberger opens her paper with an anecdote about a reference librarian who, when teaching a workshop, would hold up photos of different patrons and invite the librarians in attendance to provide background information for the individuals pictured. When a picture of an older man in a flannel shirt with disheveled hair was held up, there was an interesting split between public and academic librarians: Public librarians thought the man was homeless, while academic librarians thought he was a professor (Hersberger, 2005, p. 199). In the public librarians' case, they were "poverty profiling" (Berman, 2007, p. 104) the man in the photo based on what they considered to be the telltale signs of homelessness, even though Dowdell and Liew (2019) and Kelleher (2013) note that it can be difficult to identify the homeless through direct observation alone. Determining the economic status of a library patron through observation is something Hersberger cautions against, and Gehner (2010) suggests that where someone falls above or below the poverty line is a very limited way to understand a person's situation (p. 41).

A homeless person's status already limits their access to what we might call *mainstream society*, and, as librarians, having a limited view of homelessness impacts how we serve this population within the context of the library. We might make assumptions about how homeless people will behave and create policies to limit those behaviors like the patron hygiene policy put in place at the Joint Free Library in Morristown, New Jersey, which was at the center of the 1991 U.S. Federal Court Case *Kreimer v. Morristown* (958 F. 2d 1241 3d Cir. 1992; 765 F. Supp. 181 D.N.J. 1991). We might also make assumptions about the needs of people experiencing

homelessness and the reasons they use public libraries, unintentionally creating a dichotomy between “solid middle class persons” (Berman, 2007, p. 105) and the homeless, who already lack self-esteem due to their social exclusion (Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012).

Is the library designed with all people in mind? Or is it designed for what Gaudet (2013) calls the “self-sufficient user” (p. 45)? And should any user who doesn’t fit the definition of “self-sufficient” be considered a “problem patron?” As librarians and information scholars, we must shift this discourse if we want to make public libraries more socially inclusive for people experiencing homelessness (Muggleton, 2013), and that necessitates assessing the information needs of homeless patrons individually (Hersberger, 2005).

This paper proposes that we consider the different layers of information needs people experiencing homelessness have: everyday needs that result from their homeless status, contextual needs based on their individual situation, and higher-level needs related to self-actualization and identity formation. This paper also aims to explore how certain information needs among people experiencing homelessness have resulted from feeling socially excluded from public life, and how the public library can be a space of social inclusion for this population.

Literature Review

Who are the homeless?

“Without a home” can’t be our definition for homelessness, because it doesn’t help us understand the people who are experiencing it (Wong, 2009, p. 399). It also neglects to make clear that poverty is inherent in homelessness. Why are people experiencing homelessness never described as *poor*, only *homeless*? Like poverty, homelessness is an economic condition (Holt, 2006), a condition where people “do not have much money or many material possessions” (p. 180). “Unpropertied” is the term Sparks (2017) uses, one that does the job of describing both what someone lacks and their *outsider* status. Unpropertied suggests that what once made someone an acceptable member of middle-class society has been undone. Throughout this paper, “homeless” and “homelessness” are used to refer to persons who lack property—stable housing, money, and other material wealth. These persons could also be lacking a social support system or public assistance (Hersberger, 2005, p. 200).

That said, people experiencing homelessness *are* more than and *experience* more than their social and economic condition. Like middle- or high-income individuals, the homeless are mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, sons, and daughters. They can be unemployed, under-employed, veterans, mentally ill, immigrants, teachers, and former English majors. And, yes, due to the circumstances that result from homelessness—living on the streets, having fewer public facilities where they feel welcome—people experiencing this condition might have bad body odor. But so can the rest of us, Hersberger (2005) points out. Bad body odor is not just a characteristic of homelessness, it’s not even inherent to homelessness. The point is that homelessness is a condition that can impact anyone. There’s no one way to become homeless, and there’s no one way to escape it (Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012).

But on top of all the burdens that come with homelessness, a person is forced to adopt a “homeless identity” and the stigma that comes with it (Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012, p. 221). No matter what their lives were like before becoming homeless, they come to see themselves as different from the rest of society, because society makes them feel this difference. In Hilow and Michael’s (1992) *Temporary Dwellings*, a short film about the Seattle Housing and Resource Effort’s (SHARE) attempt to build a lasting tent city for the homeless community, they interviewed a SHARE member named Stan Burris about how society makes him feel as a homeless person:

“What it says in the forms is that Stan Burris is unable to get a job and it’s true. It’s true if we look at a career, if we look at cars, at all the things, the possessions perhaps which are recognized as a reflection of this person’s worth, [that] this person cares to be a good member of the community, [that] this person can be trusted.”

There's an important distinction, here, between how the homeless live and how they feel about themselves. Do they feel like outsiders because they don't own property or because society places so much value on property?

People experiencing homelessness are treated as and made to feel like an "unworthy" population, like they are a problem that needs to be solved (Hersberger, 2005). In the 1980s, cities across the U.S. even tried to solve their "homeless problem" by giving people one-way bus tickets to other cities (Ayers, 2006). In the 1990s, a homeless patron filed suit against the Joint Free Library in Morristown, New Jersey, because of a hygiene policy they were trying to use to ban this patron from the library. While the Federal District Court of New Jersey ruled in favor of the homeless patron in *Kreimer v. Morristown* (1991), it was overturned in the Federal Court of Appeal because "a library was a limited public forum" and "library rules did not violate [the] First Amendment" (Wong, 2009, p. 397). These are just some of the ways we treat people experiencing *homelessness*, rather than homelessness itself, as the problem.

On a single night in 2020 around 580,000 people experienced homelessness, with 61% staying in shelters and 39% going unsheltered (2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, p. 5). Between 2019 and 2020, there was a 2% increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness. It may be too soon to determine how much the economic crisis sparked by the global pandemic has impacted these numbers, but it does go to show that many of us are an economic crisis away from becoming homeless.

Social exclusion and the need to belong

The history of Seattle's Tent Cities is symbolic of homeless people's marginalized "place" in society and their need to create safe spaces where they can feel some sense of dignity (Sparks, 2017). In the early 1990s, a group of homeless activists formed SHARE (Seattle Housing and Resource Effort) and built an encampment where the city's depression-era Hoovervilles once stood (Sparks, 2017) as an act of protest. Seattle had been investing more money into high-rise apartment buildings than into homeless shelters, and the SHARE activists came together to demand—through a camp-in style protest—the establishment of a homeless-run shelter (Hilow & Michael, 1992). "We're not going to sit around in shelters and wait for housing to be built," said SHARE co-founder Scott Murrow. "We're going to do the best we can with what we have; we can't wait anymore" (Hilow & Michael, 1992). The city eventually offered the protestors a bus barn as a temporary shelter until a permanent location could be secured (Sparks, 2017). This was in exchange for SHARE taking down their first Tent City (Hilow & Michael, 1992). But the city reneged on its promise and more Tent Cities were built in response (Sparks, 2017).

According to their website, SHARE (now joined by the women-led organization WHEEL) now operates 11 indoor shelters and two Tent Cities, and their mission continues to be "breaking down attitudinal and unconstitutional legal barriers to Tent Cities." In 2015, the Seattle City Council voted to legalize and regulate permanent homeless encampments built on city property, legislation that had been introduced back in 2013 but only received unanimous support after it was reported that a man fell to his death from an encampment above the freeway (Sparks, 2017). The opposition to legalizing encampments back in 2013 was that the city should be working to increase funding for housing options, that anything else would be "a tacit acceptance of a substandard life" (Holden, 2014).

And that is the metaphor for the legal recognition of encampments—that homelessness is accepted, that the city has a "place" for the homeless. Sparks (2017) described the early Tent Cities as places of "political spectacle" when SHARE built them in protest of the city's housing policies, but this new bill seems like a way for the city to seclude its homeless population in plain sight (p. 90). Actions and policies like this one in Seattle, perhaps, are meant to make the majority feel okay with the social exclusion of a particular group. That's typically how marginalization happens, according to Holt (2006), "when agency leaders determine that what they already are doing for 'everybody' meets the needs of a particular population, no matter what conditions that group faces" (p. 181).

Annette DeFaveri (2005) challenges libraries and other public institutions to consider how our “culture of comfort” causes us to impose concepts of what’s “appropriate” or “right” on people who never asked for them (p. 259). Muggleton and Ruthven (2012) echo this sentiment in their study on how homelessness might impact a person’s access to the “informational mainstream” because of their exclusion from “formal social networks” (p. 221). The homeless tend to rely on more informal social networks, like their peers, as a result (Hersberger, 2002; Bunić, 2012; Muggleton, 2013; Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012; Sparks, 2017). But Muggleton and Ruthven’s findings indicate that people experiencing homelessness are able to access “inexpensive” information sources (e.g., TV, radio, newspapers, books) through free services like the public library. It was important for participants in this study to stay informed of current events for conversational purposes, and also to stay connected with their life before homelessness. Muggleton and Ruthven also found, which aligns with Hodgetts et al. (2008), that people experiencing homelessness use libraries to read and study in order to boost their self-esteem and maintain self-worth. Both seem like higher-level needs that would help the homeless feel part of society.

Sparks’s (2017) ethnographic fieldwork in Seattle’s Tent City 3 highlights the “expressions of social belonging” among homeless residents that result from contributing to a “safe space” that allows them to be citizens rather than deviants (p. 94). Much like participants in Muggleton and Ruthven’s (2012) study who had greater feelings of self-esteem from having access to the right information sources, Tent City 3 residents experience heightened self-esteem from feeling like productive members of a community (Sparks, 2017, p. 96). Within the space, residents delegate tasks and set rules democratically through community meetings, practicing a kind of “informal citizenship” separate from propertied citizenship (p. 91). Residents expressed that they feel a sense of *autonomy*, *agency*, and *responsibility* that they don’t get in larger society (92). In fact, people experiencing homelessness often feel patronized by many of the services that are meant to help them, whether it’s a shelter with a curfew, a public library that instructs rather than listens (DeFaveri, 2005, p. 260), or a healthcare professional who doesn’t take their concerns seriously (Ensign & Panke, 2002). While Tent City residents do feel a sense of citizenship within the camp, it’s important to note that most residents see their homeless status as a temporary stop on the path to “becoming conventionally laboring propertied citizens” (Sparks, 2017, p. 100). This suggests that people experiencing homelessness want to access formal citizenship. They want to belong.

There is a significant amount of literature that examines the services public libraries provide to the poor and homeless through the lens of “social exclusion,” especially in reference to how policies can be equally applied to all patrons. Discourse appears to be changing, but some librarians have historically thought of populations like the homeless as “problem patrons.” Their role as librarians, then, was to meet the needs of these problem patrons without upsetting the more “deserving” or “worthy” ones (Murphy, 1999). With this attitude, the library becomes a space where people experiencing homelessness are secluded to a corner or kept out entirely. Murphy’s (1999) solution is to treat the homeless and other marginalized groups as “special populations” that deserve a certain kind of attention (p. 60). The author of this paper suggests that treating people experiencing homelessness as a special population is a form of social exclusion and risks patronizing them.

Homeless patrons use the library for job searching, education, entertainment, reading, and emailing just like propertied patrons (Berman, 2007, p. 105), but they might also use it to escape the elements (then again, wouldn’t you if it starts to rain while you’re out for a walk and happen to be near a library?). But creating special services for the homeless might call attention to their differences (Muggleton, 2013) when what they want is to feel like they belong. That’s not to say that homeless patrons don’t need access to social services or literacy courses, but these programs should be made available and accessible to every library patron.

Identity formation and higher-level needs

Like any group of library users, people experiencing homelessness have “general” and “specific” needs they might be looking to fulfill when they visit the library (Wong, 2009, p. 401). Kelleher’s

(2013) findings that the top three reasons homeless patrons use the library is to read for entertainment, use the internet to look up information, or to use the internet to correspond with people align with studies like Dowdell and Liew (2019), who found that people experiencing homelessness don't just have needs related to their property status.

The needs of homeless persons range from day-to-day survival to self-actualization, though Muggleton and Ruthven (2012) point out that library and information science literature tends to focus on the former. There's a significant body of research around whether social workers should be employed by public libraries, around the barriers to information access that homeless people face, and around the ways that libraries can best communicate with the homeless. But Muggleton and Ruthven's study aims to fill a gap in the literature on how people experiencing homelessness use information to meet higher-level needs like "identity formation" and "social interaction" (p. 223).

Hersberger (2002, 2003) has studied how homeless parents use formal and informal social networks to seek information, but these parents were seeking "everyday life" information about housing and daycare (2002, p. 53). Muggleton and Ruthven look at social interactions in a different way. They were still curious about how homeless people access information through informal social networks, but they also wanted to explore whether *socializing* was important to their participants. Most did mention that meeting new people and having "varied social circles" were "positive aspects of becoming homeless" (Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012, p. 231).

Hersberger's (2003) research also discusses the importance of addressing the needs of the homeless in a "sequence." "For example, a person may need to find a car and childcare before s/he can find a job" (Kelleher, 2013, p. 21). Hersberger's *sequence* follows the pattern of Maslow's pyramid, where higher-level needs like self-actualization aren't surfaced "until more basic physiological needs have been met" (Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012, p. 222). But it is Muggleton and Ruthven's view that higher-level needs always coexist with more basic ones, which is why homeless people without a support network can be particularly susceptible to low self-esteem (p. 222).

Apart from reading and learning for "escapism," Muggleton and Ruthven's research reveals that their participants also read to boost their self-esteem and learn about themselves, suggesting that information plays a vital role in identity formation for people experiencing homelessness: "Books can widen a potentially curtailed information environment and give people more confidence about themselves, challenging possible prejudice and perhaps addressing more deep-seated self-esteem issues" (pp. 233-234). For residents of Tent City 3, Sparks (2017) found that identity formation through "collective self-governance" was important for defining themselves against a system that treated them as "less than human" (p. 92). Having a sense of identity can give people experiencing homelessness a sense of belonging. This is also confirmed by Dowdell and Liew's (2019) interviews with homeless Māori in New Zealand. Homeless Māori patrons, Dowdell and Liew found, use the library to research their genealogy and culture, which participants believed "would help build identity and resilience" (p. 7).

Everyday life needs of people experiencing homelessness

"Sequence" was mentioned in the previous section about high-level needs—the idea that certain basic needs have to be met in order for a person to focus on needs related to identity and self-actualization. That's what Muggleton and Ruthven (2012) find problematic when considering a population like the homeless. If LIS professionals think of needs as a hierarchy as opposed to a grid where they all intersect, we might be playing a role in perpetuating homeless individuals' secluded position in society.

What Hersberger (2003) probably means by there being a sequence of needs to address when serving the homeless—they need a car before they can get a job in order to pay for childcare—is that we all have an "order of things" (Savolainen, 1995) when seeking information about a problem or everyday task. Westbrook (2015) refers to this as "recognizing individuals' situated life needs" (pg. 8). And for Westbrook, letting the patron's "self-identity" guide the type of help that a librarian provides, even though the librarian might be aware that a patron is in crisis, is crucial (pg. 11). It's important for a person experiencing homelessness to

maintain their agency and autonomy, which Sparks (2017) found are normally taken away from them in these moments when they're seeking assistance.

Librarians should also consider how helping a homeless patron is an act of bridging *two worlds*. Chatman (1996) discusses how the dichotomy of "insiders/outsideers" impacts the way knowledge is sought and acquired (p. 194). This paper has discussed how homeless people are relegated to an "outsider" position in society, but when seeking help or information they might see the source they're turning to as an *outsider* (Chatman, 1996, p. 194). A homeless patron is likely to be protective of their world until they feel they can trust a librarian they're asking for help. Chatman's (2000) "theory of life in the round" can be used to explain why homeless individuals might exhibit "self-protective behaviors" (p. 7) to conceal their homeless status in a library setting. It also explains why direct observation can't always help librarians determine whether or not a patron is experiencing homelessness (Hersberger, 2002; Berman, 2007; Kelleher, 2013; Dowdell & Liew, 2019).

In Chatman's study of ageing women living in a "voluntary age-segregated environment," she uncovered that many of these women's "public behaviors were driven by social norms" (Chatman, 2000, p. 7). They had a desire to seem "normal," to blend in. This not only relates to the theme of belonging that runs through the literature on the information needs and behaviors of the homeless, but it also sheds light on Muggleton and Ruthven's (2012) finding that many homeless people try to stay connected to the life they had before becoming homeless. Are homeless people ever fully removed from one "world" and absorbed into another?

It is important to let people experiencing homelessness determine the type of assistance they'd like to receive from librarians. The advice and information they seek might have nothing to do with their homeless status. Still, there is information related to homelessness that these patrons might need even if they don't ask for it. What are these information needs and in what ways can libraries fulfill them without infringing on a patron's autonomy? Savolainen's (1995) model for Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS) could help us think about how a homeless person's "way of life" and their "mastery" of it tends to be limited by the public spaces they're able to use. For example, the library offers "shelter" during the day while nighttime shelters are closed. Considering the "time budget" (Savolainen, 1995, p. 268) of homeless individuals can help libraries develop services for achieving "mastery of life." Time limits on computer usage, for example, prevent homeless people who have no other way to access a computer from searching for and applying for jobs. In North Carolina, the Forsyth County Library learned that Sunday afternoons were a "dead time" for the homeless in the city's downtown area, so the library started offering programming to fill that time gap (Skinner, 2016, p. 3).

Increased operating hours would make it easier for homeless patrons to search for information and pass the time, but there are also basic and social service needs that people experiencing homelessness struggle to meet. While they didn't rank high in Kelleher's (2013) research on the reasons homeless people use libraries, a few respondents did list using the bathroom for hygiene purposes, sleeping, and shelter (p. 25). Hersberger (2002) found that the everyday life needs of homeless parents in shelters consist of trying to navigate complex government websites and searching for social service resources to assist with finding stable housing, childcare, repairing bad credit histories, and dealing with substance abuse or domestic violence (p. 53). There's an opportunity for libraries to partner with community organizations that can provide the resources people experiencing homelessness need on a daily basis. Some libraries have had success with employing social workers to address the more serious issues that arise in individual situations (Cathcart, 2008; Garner et al., 2020; Lloyd, 2020). And some libraries have been tasked with playing a role in larger initiatives to end chronic homelessness or mitigate social exclusion like Forsyth County Library (2016) and all British Public Libraries (Gehner, 2010).

But when serving people experiencing homelessness, it's important not to categorize them as "other" (Muggleton, 2013, p. 11). It's all about how these services are framed. If a social worker is hired to *only* help the homeless, that could be just as damaging as creating policies to target patrons with poor hygiene. Will programs developed specifically for the homeless place barriers between homeless and non-homeless patrons? Should libraries develop programs that

could, potentially, benefit patrons as a whole? The Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Library in San José, California, realized that their existing programming could be valuable to the homeless with a few adjustments (Collins et al., 2009, pp. 112-113). To address the “digital divide” among Silicon Valley residents, they added computer skills courses that covered topics like employment opportunities. In addition to group classes, they also provided drop-in opportunities to give patrons the option “to choose the atmosphere most comfortable for them” (p. 113).

‘Not just for sleeping’—the library as third place

The Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Library in San José, California, joins their city library with the San José State University Library and “include[s] two sets of main doors that permit entrance from the city side with a clear view into the campus on the university side” (Collins et. al, 2009, p. 109). What this architectural design does is allow “a person, independent of his or her economic means, to enter the main city library building and ‘see’ the possibility of entering the campus to earn a degree and advance socially, economically, and professionally” (109), a “visual message” to all who enter.

This section of the paper ends with a different metaphor than the one it started with, one that lets homeless and other marginalized people look beyond their situation, not feel excluded by it. This paper has briefly touched on the importance of “place” and “space” in relation to social exclusion, but this section will specifically focus on the library as a “third place” and what that means for people without property.

Sparks (2017) explains that while residents of Tent City 3 have been relegated to an informal citizenship, they’re able to negotiate identities different from their homeless stereotypes and satisfy their needs for community and belonging. For homeless people who use public libraries, most say they feel welcome to find resources that help them escape, cope, and learn more about themselves (Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012; Kelleher, 2013; Dowdell & Liew, 2019). And for patrons who ask questions at the information desk, they’re fulfilling a need for socialization (Klinenburg, 2019). Emma Wood (2020) emphasizes that patrons have a desire to share their stories in a safe space. “Sometimes it is not an answer that they seek, rather it is in the ‘asking’ that they obtain what they need,” she writes (p.1). The free internet access public libraries provide also gives patrons a way to share their stories. Kevin Barbieux, who has been chronically homeless since he was 21, uses library computers to keep a blog, “The Homeless Guy,” about his experiences (Wong, 2009, p. 401).

This desire for storytelling and socialization situates the public library as a “third place,” which Oldenburg (in several editions of his book that was originally published in 1989) defines as a community-oriented space one visits when they’re not at home or work. Oldenburg (1999) outlines criteria third places must meet, namely that they should happen on “neutral ground” (Fisher & Naumer, 2005, p. 95) or “unrestricted space” as Wood (2020) calls it. It should not have formal membership, conversation should be encouraged, and people should feel at home (Oldenburg, 1999). For people experiencing homelessness, Oldenburg’s definition of third place is flawed, as it necessitates owning property and employment. Perhaps it’s safe to say that it necessitates being middle class. And if we look closely at Oldenburg’s criteria, we can see how the library isn’t always a neutral ground for people outside of this class. While libraries are free to enter, a library card is required to check out a book and is a common barrier for people experiencing homelessness. Conversation may be encouraged, but is it encouraged among all people regardless of economic status? And what would it mean for a library to “feel like home” to a person experiencing homelessness?

Wood (2020) argues that public libraries are more important than ever as they start to reflect their roots in 17th-century European coffeehouses and salons. Salons and coffeehouses grew out of a need for spaces that would encourage conversation and the exchange of diverse ideas in the public sphere, a framework for human interaction on which present-day libraries are based (p. 6). These “library-like” spaces gained prominence in the U.S. during the 18th and 19th centuries, giving the rising middle class a place to discuss politics and other civic matters until more traditional libraries started to appear. These first libraries combined aspects of subscription book clubs, salons, and restricted libraries, which is actually what motivated Andrew Carnegie to

invest in building libraries that would be accessible to anyone regardless of economic status: He was turned away from a library when he couldn't afford the subscription fee (Wood, 2020, p. 7). So public libraries were once places where the middle class could engage in "active citizenry" (Elmborg, 2011).

As libraries continue to evolve and reflect their history as places that foster communication among patrons, more thought needs to be given to how homeless individuals can enter that space. It's one thing to allow them to use the library for shelter, but engaging them as citizens and community members is a more welcoming and inclusive approach.

Service Proposal

Based on user studies in library and information science, environmental planning, and social science literature, I recommend a multi-stepped approach to meeting the different types of needs people experiencing homelessness using our library might have: basic, everyday, higher-level. The first step will address the basic physiological need of hygiene that often causes patrons to be "poverty profiled" (Berman, 2007) and treated as "other." The second step will help them find and access necessary government and social services, as well as navigate complex bureaucratic websites (Cathcart, 2008). The third measure helps foster "identity formation" (Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012; Sparks, 2017; Dowdell & Liew, 2019) through library resources, and the fourth considers how library space and public discourse (Wood, 2020) can bring all patrons into conversation.

In addition to scholarly literature, I've also looked at services provided to the homeless through public libraries in Atlanta, Jersey City, New York City, San Francisco, and Seattle to understand what is available. Some have inspired elements of this proposal, but they aren't designed to address the different levels of needs that homeless individuals face at once (Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012). This service proposal also recommends ways that each measure can be framed to encourage all patrons to use them. Unlike genealogists, knitters, amateur bakers, or young professionals, homeless persons are a marginalized library user group, and creating programs to specifically target their needs might further exclude them from the library community (Muggleton, 2013).

1. Hygiene care

While it doesn't rank high on the list of reasons why homeless persons use the library (Kelleher, 2013), using the bathroom to bathe was listed. The literature has also identified bad body odor and a dirty appearance as issues that offend other patrons and provoke public libraries to create discriminatory policies (Murphy, 1999; Hersberger, 2005; Berman, 2007; Wong, 2009; Kelleher, 2013). There are various reasons why people experiencing homelessness don't have access to a shower and toiletries, ranging from sleeping rough on the street to there being a long line at the shelter. Meeting this basic physiological need could increase a homeless patron's acceptance within the library, as well as outside of it. Like the San Francisco Public Library (Ruhmann, 2014), our library will partner with a nonprofit to install a washroom equipped with a shower, towels, and toiletries that are free to use.

The shower will be available to everyone in the library community. It can be promoted as a way to cool down during the summer months, an emergency option if your water gets turned off, or a lifesaver if your child throws up while at the library and you need to quickly clean them off. The goal is to make sure everyone knows that it's a community shower.

2. Employing an onsite social worker

Whether it's because e-government websites are difficult to navigate (Cathcart, 2008) or simply because people experiencing homelessness don't know where to access the right resources, the homeless can end up spending their days looking for social services to help with everyday life needs like housing (Hersberger, 2003). Kelleher's (2013) study also found that a significant number of respondents use the library to find information

that social services provide. The question of whether librarians should act as social workers runs through some of the literature (Westbrook, 2015), but there seems to be growing consensus that libraries need to evolve to help patrons find more than just books.

For years, libraries have partnered with community organizations to improve their outreach populations like the homeless. More recently, libraries have started employing onsite social workers to educate library staff on how to best work with homeless individuals and work with patrons directly (Garner et al., 2020; Lloyd, 2020). Forsyth County Public Library in North Carolina hired what they call a “peer support specialist,” someone who used to be homeless and can best help other homeless patrons navigate everyday life events (Skinner, 2016).

The social worker doesn't only have to support homeless patrons; they can support the whole library. The library social worker will be available to answer anyone's questions and point them in the right direction to find any resources they might need. Our library will also host different events to make it easier for the social worker to engage with all patrons, such as a coffee mixer or lecture about what social workers do.

3. Foster “identity formation” through resources

Apart from basic and everyday life information needs, there are also higher-level needs like identity formation that people experiencing homelessness tend to read books to meet (Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012). Homeless patrons seek out sources that allow them to escape, cope, and learn more about themselves (Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012). One study also found that homeless patrons might want to research their genealogy or cultural background (Dowdell & Liew, 2019). Reading and learning helped increase the self-esteem of homeless patrons (Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012), which led to a greater feeling of belonging.

Our library can expand our collections to include books and resources that better reflect what patrons want to learn about, including different cultures. These different resources will also be made more visible and easy to find. To encourage communication between homeless and other patrons, the library will promote reading and discussion groups based on the topics and books that patrons want to read.

4. Create social spaces for conversation and storytelling

Social exclusion is a structural issue of homelessness that keeps people from entering and feeling like they belong in what can be called *mainstream society* (Bunić, 2012; Gehner, 2010; Gaudet, 2012; Berman, 2007; Muggleton, 2013; Racelis, 2018; Chatman, 1995; Murphy, 1999). Within the library, they tend to be treated as “problem patrons” or “other,” even though they mainly seek to use the library for the same reasons as all other patrons (Berman, 2007). Homeless patrons want to feel like they belong, to feel a sense of community.

When thinking about how the library might foster inclusion which can lead to homeless persons feeling a sense of agency, it's important to consider how the public library's history is rooted in the salons of 17th-century France that “brought together different social classes to engage in discourse on a level plane” (Wood, 2020, p. 6). How might we make a library a space for community discourse for all?

Our library will aim to establish itself as a “third place” for all by taking down physical barriers within the space. This open design concept will include comfortable seating, workstations, and computers spread out in small pods to encourage patrons to interact with one another and converse. A program to encourage the free flow of ideas could also help bring patrons together in this space like a personal storytelling hour or an event like Brooklyn Public Library's Night of Philosophy and Ideas.

Conclusion

Libraries should strive to advance the social inclusion of people experiencing homelessness, but it needs to be done in a way that doesn't make them feel separate or secluded from other patrons. This will only continue to perpetuate the idea that there are legitimate and unworthy patrons. Librarians should also avoid using limited definitions of "homeless" to identify what services should be developed to meet their needs. We have a tendency to define people experiencing homelessness based on what they lack, which doesn't provide us with a clear picture of what they need. Instead, we see them as "problem patrons," their issues "problems to be solved. In order to move passed this dichotomy, we need to start thinking of homeless people as *patrons* and ensure that the rest of the library community sees them that way, too.

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