The Poor and Homeless: An Opportunity for Libraries to Serve

Sheila Ayers

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Abstract

Libraries have the opportunity to provide services to poor and homeless patrons. The author gives a history of the homeless in the United States and provides examples of the different types of users among the homeless. The author identifies opportunities that libraries have for providing homeless and poor patrons with access to information about social services that are available within their communities. Computers are also identified as a means to reach users who are isolated geographically, such as users who live in rural areas, through the use of e-libraries, which are stand-alone computer banks at recreation and community centers. By reaching out to homeless and poor patrons, libraries can fulfill their mission of providing service to all.
The Poor and Homeless: An Opportunity for Libraries to Serve

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The author begins with a brief history of homelessness in the United States, which is followed up by a statistical breakdown of the population of homeless individuals and families, which I found to be very informative, especially in view of the fact that the “poor” and “homeless” can seem to be an abstract category, and not one composed of real people.

When I first began reading this article, I was a bit apprehensive about the role libraries could play in serving homeless populations. I base this on my own personal experiences encountering homeless people in the San Francisco Public Library and the Mid-Manhattan Library, the main lending library of the New York Public Library System. I am aware of own personal biases around the subject of the homeless, and the author addresses biases generally held by the non-poor and non-homeless population in her section on “perceptions…of the “deserving and undeserving poor” (Ayers, 2006).

Prior to this section, the author includes a section describing two homeless men, both of whom made use of public libraries in their communities. One of the men (“Tom”, an alias) used the library as a refuge from the weather and an occasional place to sleep, and made read newspapers, magazines and books while there, though he did not partake of library resources related to job hunting or community and social services.

The man profiled (Richard Kreimer, not an alias) was kicked out of a library. He "was asked to leave the library because of bodily odors, inappropriate stalking of female patrons, and abusive outbursts" (Ayers, 2006). He sued the library with the assistance of the ACLU, and won, though this was overturned on appeal.
This judicial ruling led the ALA to formulate a policy on inappropriate library behavior, which was rejected by the majority of librarians for being “vague” (Ayers, 2006). The ALA now has a section on dealing specifically with poor and homeless populations in its official policy manual (ALA Handbook of Organization).

The brief history on homelessness and its responses leads to what I feel is the heart of this article, which discusses the possible roles that libraries can play in helping poor and homeless populations. The author proposes that libraries keep on hand materials such as voter registration forms, vocational information, driver’s licenses forms and healthcare information (Ayers, 2006), as well as forming alliances with social service organizations to promote these services, such as going to shelters and food kitchens. In fact, at the Hedberg Public Library in Janesville, WI, when a patron is identified as being homeless, they are given a “homeless kit” filled with snacks, toiletries, and information about social services (Vogel, 2007). The San Francisco Public Library offers restricted library cards for people who cannot meet the legal identification requirements for a standard library card (Getting a Library Card - SFPL.org, 2008). These are two examples of policies that are in place to make libraries welcoming for homeless people.

The most interesting part of this section is the role that computers can play in ameliorating the conditions that the poor and homeless are in. Access to computers in public libraries is probably one of the greatest contributions that libraries can make in improving the lives of the poor and homeless (I personally had been unaware that homeless people were users of email). Indeed, computer access goes a long way toward fulfilling the mission of libraries as providers of information to the public, no matter what socio-economic class to which they may belong.

The author reports on the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s contribution of computers to libraries who have more than ten percent of their patrons living below the poverty line. The aim of this
project was to reduce the digital divide. The fact is that for the poor, libraries are the only place where they have access to the Internet. As the Internet has grown in importance, access in effect becomes another community service, providing expanded public access to community and social services.

Indeed, the author devotes the last section of the article to the rise of e-libraries (Ayers, 2006). E-libraries are an innovation in the area of community outreach that also is a mission of libraries. This is a way for libraries to not only extend their services to underserved communities (such as rural or poor urban areas), but to provide these communities a link to the world at large. Public libraries have set up computers with access to library information and databases in community and recreation centers in these areas. The computers are not staffed by any library personnel, and also serve as a low-cost alternative to opening a full branch.

I found this article to be an engaging and thoughtful look at how libraries can go beyond their mission to help not only homeless people, but also poor communities in need. Thinking such as this is especially necessary, considering the crisis that homelessness currently is in our society, not to mention the potential crisis that both homelessness and poverty may become if the current uncertain economic outlook worsens. In addition, thinking about what libraries can do to influence positive change among the homeless and the poor is a needed counter to viewing homeless people in libraries as a problem that needs to be dealt with as such. It will take a greater dedication of will and resources for libraries to reach their full potential in reaching and providing service to all members of society.
References


This is the official policy manual of the American Library Association. Section Two (Positions and Public Policy Statements), Sub-section 61 outlines the ALA’s policies towards serving poor populations. It is heartening to note that the American Library Association is committed to providing service to all users, regardless of income or social standing.


This website provides information to patrons and potential patrons as to steps are needed to obtain a library card. Types of library cards are listed at the bottom of the page. This includes types of cards that are available to individuals without standard means of identification.


This article describes homeless outreach at the Hedberg Public Library in Janesville, WI, as well as the uses that homeless patrons make of the library services. The library not only provides services to patrons who come to use the library, but also works to identify homeless patrons in the community to whom service can be provided. This is a valuable article for any library worker who is challenged by the issue surrounding outreach to homeless patrons.