When “SHHHHH” is Not Enough

When "SHHHHH" is not enough:

a case study of how the San Francisco Public Library enforces its rules in the context of equal access.

Shelly Ann Buchanan
Jonathan Leff
Melissa Mallen
Anonymous

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School of Library and Information Science - San Jose State University
Abstract

Public libraries are supposed to provide *equal access* to all citizens, but barriers exist for individuals who fall into categories that disrupt the idyllic scene generally associated with libraries. This challenge to the American Library Association’s equal access policy is raised when viewing what happens when marginalized patron populations use libraries and their resources for purposes that go against library policies. To try to understand and address this issue using an *interdisciplinary approach*, two *San Francisco Public Library* (SFPL) staff members have been interviewed who to give insight into the history of *management* approaches towards patrons with problems (PWP) within the SFPL. These interviews are also anchored by additional research on the issue from various resources.
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Statement of Problem
Public library managers face many challenges when dealing with patrons with problems (PWP), as these patrons can be disruptive to other patrons who make use of the library in what are perceived to be traditional ways. PWPS can be deemed threatening to many users and can be a factor in other patrons deciding not to partake of library services. The presence of PWPS raise questions ranging from what resources are diverted to dealing with the challenges raised by this population of patrons, to larger questions related to the true extent of equal access to all public library users.

History and Barriers
The San Francisco Public Library (SFPL), main branch, is a 7-story 376,000 square-foot information Mecca. The library is located at Marshall Square in the San Francisco Civic Center. The location can be both a blessing and a bane. While many individuals have at some point in their lives used a library, few understand the dynamics at play in managing and funding library staff and services. The blessing for the SFPL main branch location could be seen as the proximity to many patrons, bus lines, and public transportation. So much so, that the SFPL 2006-2007 annual statistics count 1,973,281 visits (SFPL online).

On the other hand, the SFPL main branch is also centrally located to a population of people that have certain challenges in life - whether from drug/alcohol addiction, homelessness and/or mental health illnesses. It is this population of library patrons that test the American Library Associations equal access policy, both in the SFPL and other libraries within the nation.

The concept of equal access can be so effective in its day-to-day existence that it has the potential to be overlooked by library patrons. If a patron that fits into the normalized categories of
acceptable behaviors, background and presentation uses library services, the path is for the most part, obstacle free. However, when a patron uses library services in a way that is not considered typical, such as bathing in a sink in the bathroom or napping on the cushy chair in the corner of the reading room, then many problems can arise. According to the SFPL Policy Manual: Policy #200, Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves… Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background or views (SFPL online).

Within this policy, it is written that a person that wakes up in a bed in a home that they either rent or own has the same and equal access to all library services as does an individual who wakes up under the overpass with only a shopping cart and a dog to represent their ownership. It seems simple and uncomplicated: libraries are public spaces that provide equal access to all. However, as seen in the famous Brown vs. Board of Education ruling overturning the concept of “separate-but-equal”, not all people’s circumstances are actually equal. There are quite a few questions and very few answers from the multitude of groups that are vested in this issue. If one asks advocates of San Francisco’s homeless/mental-health/addiction coalitions, as well as librarians, library managers, social workers and patrons who fit into normalized groups and the patrons that have been dubbed - albeit not unilaterally - patrons with problems - how to address the issue, one will find that each group has their own viewpoint of the issue. The additional level of the politics involved in libraries and their services also raise the question of who in the end really has the final say on how PWP’s are addressed in library policy. Howell (2004) states that politics within libraries are, “an art and a science, and it is critically
important to libraries, librarians, and library trustees.” The policy that any library adopts in addressing PWP’s will ultimately be impacted by the politics at play in the library board.

The issue of patrons that are part of the underserved population are addressed within the library community in a variety of ways. The ALA has a Hunger, Homelessness and Poverty task force which works to address problems by using the information to highlight, “Concern for civil and economic rights was an important element in the founding of SRRT and remains an urgent concern today.”(ALA online) The ALA Bill of Rights is also a key component in the way in which patrons of all walks of life are treated in libraries, as well as the adoption in 1990 of what has been dubbed the Poor People’s Policy (PPP). Yet many barriers exist and questions still persist when trying to figure out how and if anything should be done with patrons that use the library just as a place to escape from the streets and do not utilize the library resources in the perceived traditional way.

The library community itself is divided on the issue, as can be seen by the famous Kriemer v. Morristown case in which the Joint Free Library in Morristown New Jersey asked Richard Kriemer to leave because the staff found his odor not tolerable. This case made visible multiple sides of an issue that has a long history in public libraries. The lower court ruled in favor of Kriemer and the ACLU but the higher court overturned the ruling citing, "Library is a limited public forum and is obligated only to permit the public to exercise rights that are consistent with the nature of the library." "The appeals panel stated that the library is not a shelter or a lounge, and that this ruling prohibits one patron from unreasonably interfering with other patron's use and enjoyment of the library" (Silver 1996).

Again, though this may sound like a simplistic answer to a monumental problem, it is in reality just a cosmetic change - the band-aid over the scar. While the case gave libraries a legal avenue to enforce the removal of patrons, it did not address the bigger concern. Equal access for all patrons is a
fundamental principle of library policy just as opposing censorship is a core application of public access to information

**Historic and Contemporary Responses by Homeless Advocacy Groups to the San Francisco Public Library**

San Francisco has a number of outreach services and advocacy groups for the homeless, with one of the more prominent of these advocacy groups being the Coalition on Homelessness, which was founded in 1987. According to their website, they work with and on behalf of homeless people to “defend homeless and low-income people from attacks on their rights and their persons, while advocating for permanent solutions to homelessness that take into account not only poverty's devastating effects, but also its root causes” (*Coalition on homelessness, San Francisco*).

In my research for this case study, Jonathan Leff was unable to find a specific example wherein the Coalition on Homelessness worked with the San Francisco Public Library, or was directly involved in a case that involved the Library. Mr. Leff did find a case where the role of the Coalition on Homelessness and other advocacy groups was called into a question as it pertained to the death of a homeless patron in the Main Branch of the Library.

On March 7, 2008, a homeless patron named James Allen Hill was found dead of a drug overdose in a restroom at the Main Branch of the San Francisco Public Library. In a column written for the San Francisco Chronicle dated March 13, 2008, Nevius (2008, March 13) contends that Mr. Hill would have received treatment had it not been for lawyers from the Coalition on Homelessness who worked to get Mr. Hill’s arrests and convictions for disorderly conduct dismissed.

In response, Friedenbach (2008) from the Coalition on Homelessness accused Nevius of lying in his column about Mr. Hill’s death and the Coalition’s role in it. Whereas Nevius claimed that Mr. Hill would have received treatment if he had been convicted on any of the charges for which he was
arrested, the Coalition claims that lawyers were not interfering with the process, and that Mr. Hill would not have received treatment through the courts. The Coalition’s response makes note of the shortage of substance abuse and mental health treatment available from the City of San Francisco, and states that the City was proposing a cut of funding for these programs by 15% in 2008.

According to an interview with a reference librarian (A. Cheroske, personal communication, October 3, 2008) at the Main Branch, the Library Administration tends to feel intimidated by the various homelessness advocacy groups, and tries to stay out of the “politics of homelessness.” Indeed, the Coalition on Homelessness has been accused in the past of “politicizing homelessness” (Chronicle Staff, 2003). It would be worth more study to determine if there are ways that the Coalition on Homelessness or other homelessness advocacy groups could work directly with the San Francisco Public Library in a more positive manner on these issues.

Melissa Mallen conducted an interview with Regan Gong, manager of the San Francisco Public Library’s Anza branch, who stated that there is a four person team of social workers known as San Francisco Homeless Outreach Team (also known as SFHOT; San Francisco homeless outreach team, 2005) that is assigned to the libraries and in theory is supposed to be able to be sent to a branch or the main when there is a very disruptive homeless patron (or one that appears to be homeless). The problem with this is that these same four people are also assigned to Project Homeless Connect and are often not available when needed by the library. Also, SFHOT cannot directly approach a presumed homeless patron, and must basically wait until that person talks to them and then they can ask questions and try to counsel them. Regan would not say with certainty that this is because SFHOT fears the homeless advocate’s potential cries of harassment, but he thinks that might be the case.

The Impact on the Library Environment and General Public Response to the SFPL Environment
The challenges that (PWP) present to the public library not only affect library staff but also impact other library patrons. In addition, PWP can influence the quality of the library environment as a whole. Approaches to the issue are as varied as the numerous stakeholders who in one way or another, must cope with the problem on a daily basis.

On the one hand, some argue that libraries should restrict access to PWP, arguing that libraries need to maintain an atmosphere that supports reading, reflection and studying. Comstock-Gay (1995) states that many people come into the library because it is a refuge. Patrons who exhibit disruptive conduct and have unpleasant appearances and odors can greatly disrupt the quality of the library experience for others. As Holt and Holt (2005) point out, in order to have privileges to public space, people have to conduct themselves in a certain manner.

On the other hand, many argue that free access to all is the fundamental and guiding principle of the public library system. In fact, as Murphy (1999) points out in her research, historically libraries began as agencies for social change, “with the goal of providing equal access to information,” (p. 3). Powerful groups such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other advocacy groups continue to assert the rights for all people to have access to public services, with the library being one of them.

In a large, urban public library system like San Francisco, responding to and handling PWP is commonplace, and does have an effect on other library patrons in several ways: 1) disruptive and aggressive behavior from PWP can create a feeling of being unsafe in the library for other patrons; 2) PWP can put a demand on the librarian’s time and therefore limit resources for other patrons; and 3) many library patrons limit their use of the San Francisco Main Library to avoid PWP, and visit their local branches instead.
Disruptive and aggressive behavior impacts the library. As Comstock-Gay states, “the security problem is not about just homelessness, but about exhibitionists, or the person with a gun in a backpack, or the fear of attacks in the restroom” (p.34). The ability to conduct library business can be affected when offensive behavior of some kind keeps other patrons away from accessing the services and resources of the library. In addition, the organization itself has a responsibility to keep its staff safe.

The demand on a librarian’s time from PWP can impinge on the time available for other patrons. In our interview with a San Francisco public library professional, the demands on librarian’s resources to respond to and handle issues and requests from PWP was clearly an issue. Apparently, at a number of the branches, several PWP ask the reference librarians the same questions every day, (one asking for the phone number of a small hospital in Italy every day, while another is always asking for a copy of a picture of “Laughing Sal” a San Francisco landmark). With the limited staffing of the San Francisco main branch, a librarian is a precious resource, and many employees feel the pressure of not adequately serving all patrons, with the daily demands on their time from PWP.

Moreover, many patrons avoid going to the San Francisco main branch, a beautiful, new facility, built in 1996, at a cost of $110 million dollars. The main branch contains a well-developed collection, state-of-the-art technology, and a wide selection of multi-media resources. Even so, many patrons prefer to keep to their local, neighborhood branches, because of the presence of PWP and the anxiety of encountering them. Because of the main branch’s location, close to homeless shelters, drug detox centers, and other social service agencies, the SFPL Main tends to become “adult daycare for wackos,” according to one of the staff members we interviewed.

The impact of PWP on the library environment and on other patrons is directly affected by the organization’s attitude and response. As Evans and Ward indicate, every organization has a culture,
and that culture has a significant role in how the organization operates. Members of an organization share a “set of values, assumptions, and expectations regarding what is important and acceptable,” (p.49). In a large, urban system, like the public library, this is complex. However, in 2007, the library administration joined with the San Francisco Police Department to create some collaborative solutions.

Employee Responses to the Problem

Pre-2007 Policies of the SFPL

S.R. Ranagathan’s fifth law of the library as cited in Evans and Layzell Ward (2007) is “the library is a growing organism.” By declaring the library a living thing it is assumed that it is always changing, adapting, and growing. This could not be truer than when one looks at the SFPL’s approach to dealing with what Regan Gong, Manager of the SFPL’s Anza branch refers to as patrons with problems (PWP) (R. Gong, personal communication, October 9, 2008).

The SFPL, prior to 2007, approached the idea of patrons with problems much differently than it does now. According to Mr. Gong and our other contact, Art Cheroske, a 15-year employee of the SFPL, the SFPL staff used to be primarily on their own when it came to a PWP. (A. Cheroske, personal communication, October 3, 2008) When a staff member was approached by a PWP it was up to the staff member who was approached to handle the situation with the help of library security guards. All library staff, including the security guards had not had any real training prior to 2007 with how to deal with these types of issues, so there was not a truly consistent way to deal with the various issues surrounding difficult patrons.

Mr. Gong stated that there was no true codified set of rules governing the proper behavior of library patrons. It was his recollection that there were disparities between posted signs even in the same building in regards to which behaviors were acceptable and which warranted possible expulsion
from the library. The lack of consistent rules made it easier for patrons who were written up to dispute any allegations of inappropriate behavior.

After years of frustration and complaints from both staff and patrons, things finally started to change when the SFPL administration sought feedback on their policies and security issues directly from the San Francisco Police Department and the San Francisco City Attorney’s office.

Changes in policy 2007-Present

Prior to this change, the director of library security left their position and in their place, Sergeant Patrick Kwan of the SFPD became a part of the library staff and redesigned the entire library security team’s strategy. Kwan had originally wanted library security to undergo training at the San Francisco Police Academy, but according to our contacts, there never was enough funding or time available to achieve this goal on the police department’s side. Upon viewing an old press release from the SFPL prior to these changes officially taking root, the SFPL had believed that this training would take place as well (SFPL, 2006).

Sergeant Kwan also helped the SFPL codify the rules of conduct, which made the enforcement of rules much easier since there was now consistency. Now, the manager fills out incident reports in conjunction with the staff member involved in the incident. Forms are filled out in triplicate with one copy going to the SFPD; one copy going to the SFPL administration; and one staying at the branch of the library at which the incident occurred. This forms a paper trail and allows the SFPL to build a case for the possible suspension of patrons. However, Mr. Gong, as a manager, feels that even though things have improved and it is easier for the SFPL to build a case for the suspension of patrons, incidents in the library seem to be judged with more lenience than crimes that occur outside the library, often only becoming misdemeanors instead of crimes that incur jail time. Our contacts would not openly speculate why the library policies are managed this way, but based on studying other libraries
in major metropolitan areas, it is possible to speculate that politics and advocacy groups, such as ones designed to help the homeless, might be part of the problem.

Employee responses

Even with the improved post-2007 conditions, many library staff members feel frustrated when there is inconsistency in enforcing the rules. Even though the rules are codified, some managers do not always enforce the rules, preferring to use their own judgment on a case-by-case basis. Even though this seems like a fair way to deal with patrons who may not actually be disruptive despite the fact that they are violating a rule, such as the one concerning the size of bags that can be brought into the library, some employees feel that the rules must apply to everyone or else it will be impossible to enforce them when a patron truly is in violation and is disruptive. This leads to some employees feeling that they are not really supported by their managers even though the SFPL guidelines would lead an outsider to think otherwise.

Mr. Cheroske expressed that “When policies are not enforced consistently, disruptive patrons can poison the environment for everyone: staff, management, and other patrons. Library staff can become dispirited and cynical.” However, according to both of our contacts, supervisors who constantly see what is occurring on the library floor make sure that employees who appear stressed and uncomfortable get a rest before the pressure of disruptive patrons becomes too much.

Examples of disruption and staff solutions

According to Mr. Cheroske, at some branches, 8 out of 10 questions for a reference librarian have to do with real information needs, whereas at other branches, only 2 or 3 out of 10 may have to do with real information needs. Many times, patrons use the library staff and their expertise in a way that takes liberties with what the idea of a “real information need” is. The following anecdotes were
shared by our contacts and demonstrate the various disruptions that can occur as well as the solutions individual branches come up with to manage the problem.

One patron, “Joe”, consistently comes into the library and asks the same sets of questions, almost on a rotating basis. A colleague of our contacts has put together a book that is kept at her branch’s reference desk and which is full of the questions and answers that Joe always asks. The library staff are taught to hand the book to Joe when he comes in so as to save time. The title of the book is “Joe’s Book”

The staff at another branch library have imposed limits on the patron, “Billy” who in an earlier section was noted for consistently requesting pictures of “Laughing Sal.” Billy may only have one picture of Laughing Sal a day so as to save the staff’s time and allow patrons with genuine questions to have a chance to speak with a librarian.

Comparison with other libraries’ handling of similar situations

How do public library systems outside of San Francisco deal with the issues of patrons with problems? As in San Francisco, the method used is to discriminate against behavior, rather than against classes of people or individuals. Jonathan Leff spoke with Marshall Shore, who is currently Adult Services Manager at the Maricopa County (Arizona) Public Library, and is a former branch manager at the Phoenix (Arizona) Public Library.

According to Mr. Shore, management would enforce rules of non-discrimination against people, and would ensure that all patrons had to abide by the same rules, regardless of class background. However, the rules of conduct for use of the libraries are not easily accessible to the public, and are not available on the library’s website. Mr. Shore stated that this is because they do not want to give a negative image of the library to library patrons. One of the rules that he was able to tell me about relates to the size of luggage that may be brought into the library. Patrons may only bring in
bags up to a certain size, and any bags over this size have to be left in a common area at the user’s own risk. While this rule was put into effect after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, it does tend to have a restrictive effect, as many homeless patrons tend to travel with lots of bags, bundles, and other belongings. Indeed, the New York Public Library (2008) and San Francisco Public Library (2007) have similar restrictions in place.

Mr. Shore stated that management would tend to err on the side of homeless patrons when conflict arose between serving them and the fears of non-homeless patrons. Many of the branches in the Phoenix Public Library system are in suburban settings, and non-homeless users of these branches would tend to have a more negative reaction against the homeless than is common with users in urban settings.

Staff attitude towards homeless patrons was generally positive. Some of the homeless “kept tabs” on the library (M. Shore, personal communication, October 12, 2008). Mr. Shore provided an example of an occasion wherein a homeless patron read an item in a magazine which he or she felt could be useful to running the library and informed Mr. Shore or another staff member of this. The staff did enforce the rules of behavior, such as not allowing people in if it was obvious that they had been drinking.

Occasionally, there would be staff members who would have a negative reaction to a homeless patron. The management would then step in and parse the situation, and talk with the particular staff member to determine whether the staff member had a problem with the individual person, or with the person’s behavior.

While the Phoenix Public Library does not provide services specifically tailored to homeless patrons, one that does is the Hedberg Public Library in Janesville, Wisconsin. The library does not ask people if they are homeless, so as not to embarrass them. When a patron is identified as homeless,
however, the library provides him or her with a “homeless kit” that contains snacks, toiletries, and a laminated card that has information about social services as well as “survival tips” (Vogel, 2007, December 23). Residents of homeless shelters can receive temporary library cards, and children who are identified as being homeless have cards on file indicating that they have permission from their parents to use the Internet on the libraries’ computers.

The New York Public Library has an Office of Community Outreach Services (2008) whose website has a section for persons without homes. This website lists such services as read aloud programs for children in shelters, "read-to-me" programs at branch libraries and library orientation at shelters and branches. In addition, the library maintains collections of reference literature to help guide people towards needed community services. It is possible for the New York Public Library to provide such extensive services as it is one of the largest public library systems in the United States, with many financial resources received from private, charitable organizations and local government sources.

As Walton (2007) writes, evidence has surfaced on a global scale that suggests that libraries are interested in introducing elements of flexibility into their services, structures and staff. A great example of this flexibility can be found in the use e-libraries to provide services to poor and homeless people (Ayers, 2006). E-libraries are banks of computer terminals that are set up in recreational or community centers, and which are linked to the libraries’ own network. They are not staffed, and so provide a low-cost means of providing Internet access, including access to databases through the libraries’ network. In Florida, both the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library and the Hialeah Public Libraries built e-libraries to reach users in outlying rural areas who might not be able to have access to a branch library. This is a recent innovation, having developed within the last decade.
Summary

This paper examined issues of concern over the San Francisco Public Library’s response to and handling of patrons with problems (PWP). The core principle of the public library system is free access to all, but that belief can be challenged when PWP put a strain on the services of the public library and disrupt use for other patrons. The authors of this paper investigated these issues from various perspectives, looking at the root causes of the problem, identifying patrons who are problematic, identifying the various stakeholders in the issue, and discussing the problems that impact staff members and other patrons. For this case study, professionals from the San Francisco Public Library were interviewed, giving a first-hand account of the day-to-day effects of this issue on management, staff, and patrons. Included in this examination are the library policies that govern the strategies and approaches to dealing with the issues. In addition, a comparison of how other libraries in the country address this issue is included.

Conclusion

Webster’s dictionary defines the word “public” as used in the term “public library” as “for the use and benefit of all.” Over the last month, as we have spent a great deal of time becoming intimate with the daily machinations of the San Francisco Public Library, our group has discovered that public libraries often struggle to live up to this definition since it appears that indeed, several sections of the public as a whole often have their own ideas as to how the library can be used and by whom. Public libraries have not entirely developed a clear and concise strategy to please all users of the library when it comes to equal access, but they are doing their best and often are finding fair solutions to problems that are very complex. The role of the library is changing to reflect a society that is not only overflowing with information, but is also less and less aware of how libraries are still relevant. Public
libraries now need to work even harder to make information available to anyone who needs it in order to fulfill their role as “The People’s University.” However, it is also up to the public that uses the library to ensure that the library stays accessible to all. When the library makes an effort to address equal access issues it is critical that people who disagree with the libraries’ policies and find them unfair take into consideration that turning the library into a stage for unnecessary political advocacy only makes the library less accessible to everyone. Codified rules that address disruptive behavior and do not discriminate against a person based on their possession or lack of a home, appearance, socio-economic status or some other variable, should be respected because they are aiming to make sure that those who respect the library, its staff, and its patrons can use the facilities unmolested. If society only comes to identify the library as a place that cannot make itself safe and accessible to those who wish to use it for its intended purpose because of the threat of lawsuits and disruptive behavior, then the biggest threat to public libraries may not be Google, but the public itself.
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Author Note

Shelly Buchanan, Anonymous, Jonathan Leff, and Melissa Mallen are all graduate students in the Masters of Library and Information Science program at San Jose State University in San Jose, California.

This case study is based on data derived from interviews with current SFPL employees, SFPL documents, and other sources. The data on all accounts is real, not fabricated, with the exception of the names of patrons mentioned by our contacts.

We thank Regan Gong, manager of the SFPL’s Anza branch, Art Cheroske, reference librarian (semi-retired), formerly of the SFPL Main Branch and Marshall Shore, Adult Services Manager for the Maricopa County Public Library, and a former branch manager at the Phoenix Public Library in Arizona, for agreeing to talk to us for this Case Study. Mr. Cheroske is a personal friend of Melissa Mallen, however, this relationship has had no bearing on the conclusions drawn for the purposes of this case study. It is also to be noted that Mr. Gong and Mr. Cheroske do not necessarily represent the views of the San Francisco Public Library administration. Mr. Shore is a personal friend of Jonathan Leff, and as in the instance with Messrs. Cheroske and Gong, this relationship has had no bearing on the conclusions drawn for the purposes of this case study. In addition, Mr. Shore does not necessarily represent the views of the administrations of the Maricopa County Public Library or the Phoenix Public Library.

Correspondence concerning this case study should be directed to Shelly Buchanan, Instructor Liaison, Email: ogmommie@yahoo.com.