



Evidence Summary

Homeless Patrons Utilize the Library for More than Shelter but Public Library Services Are Not Designed with Them in Mind

A Review of:

Dowdell, L., & Liew, C. L. (2019). More than a shelter: Public libraries and the information needs of people experiencing homelessness. *Library & Information Science Research*, 41(4), 100984. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2019.100984>

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Abstract

Objective – The study sought to examine the information seeking behavior of homeless patrons and how public libraries meet the needs of homeless patrons.

Design – Qualitative phenomenological study.

Setting – Public libraries in New Zealand.

Subjects – Four homeless patrons who were current library patrons and seven public library workers (senior managers and two front line workers).

Methods – Purposive convenience sample of homeless patrons and library workers to participate in face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. The study utilized Creswell's four-step data analysis spiral to produce a synthesis.

Main Results – Homeless patrons utilize public libraries for far more than daytime shelter, patronizing the collections, and accessing services. The participating libraries did not have existing policies, practices, services, or staff designed for the needs and wants of homeless people, however, current offerings largely met the needs of homeless patrons.

Conclusion – Homeless people use public libraries much like non-homeless patrons and public libraries could develop specialized offerings for them, though they must take care to do so in a way that does not further marginalize this group. Additional research is needed to understand why some homeless people do not utilize the libraries.

Commentary

This study adds to the limited body of research that captures the intersection of libraries, information behavior, and homeless people.

While qualitative and exploratory in nature, this research was rigorous when appraised with the Critical Review Form for Qualitative Studies (Letts et al. 2007). Data were not collected to the point of saturation; however, the study's authors indicated the difficulty in identifying and recruiting homeless participants. This accounts for the homogeneity of homeless participants (all were of Māori descent) but makes it challenging to transfer the findings to homeless individuals of less marginalized backgrounds.

The authors could have provided more information about how their own assumptions, biases, and experiences may have influenced the interviews. The relationship of Māori ancestry to homelessness was a recurring theme in the study and one of the authors shares this characteristic with the participants. Understanding how this author's background guided the research and was possibly used to build rapport with participants would improve the credibility of this study and assist future researchers working with marginalized communities.

However, the credibility of this research is already very high. The researchers produce the full interview guide within the study, quote individual, anonymized participants, and describe in great detail the efforts made to build rapport with participants. This study provides a detailed framework for conducting research with a sensitive population respectfully without perpetuating their experience of 'othering.'

The authors' findings discredit the notion that homeless patrons use the library primarily as a daytime shelter. The authors identify and explicate specific barriers to access these patrons face and outline opportunities for public libraries and library workers.

References

- Letts, L., Wilkins, S., Law, M., Stewart, D., Bosch, J., & Westmorland, M. (2007) *Critical review form – Qualitative studies (version 2.0)*. Retrieved from http://www.peelregion.ca/health/librariy/eidmtools/qualreview_version2_0.pdf