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The Information Needs of Homeless Library Patrons in New York City

Abstract: Field study discovered some information needs of homeless people visiting public libraries in New York. During summer 2006, reference areas of New York public libraries were observed unobtrusively to track homeless patrons' use of library resources and services. Findings include the use of resources and services by homeless patrons groups.

Résumé : Une étude de terrain révèle certains besoins informationnels des itinérants visitant les bibliothèques publiques de New York. Pendant l'été 2006, les services de références des bibliothèques publiques de New York ont été observés de manière non obstructive afin de connaître les ressources et les services des bibliothèques utilisés par les itinérants. Les résultats incluent l'utilisation des ressources et des services par les groupes d'utilisateurs itinérants.

1. Introduction

During July and August of 2006 a field study aimed at the identification of homeless library patrons in New York City was conducted. The observed homeless patrons included families, mostly mothers and children in different age groups, young single males, elderly single males and married men. Homeless patrons were observed unobtrusively and were seen using electronic and paper resources available free of charge at the library's reference area. They were also observed utilizing the reference services and special library programs such as locating and printing electronic information and participating in picture book story time performed by the children's librarian.

2. Background

According to a recent report on homelessness in America, published by the NY Coalition for the Homeless, there is a drastic rise of homelessness over the past five years compared to previous decades. The report states (2005, 1):

Throughout the first half of the decade, an average of 32,609 New Yorkers slept in homeless shelters each night compared to an average of 23,295 in the 1980's. In the same period, the number of homeless families in city shelters each night has nearly doubled from an average of 3,947 families in the 1980s to a mid-decade average of 7,640 families in 2005. The most drastic increase came in the number of children seeking shelter. This decade - through 2005 - an average of 13,616 children are in New York City shelters each night, a 55 percent increase on the number of children who used city shelters on average throughout the 1990's.

The New York Public Library (NPL) is a network of research and branch libraries totaling 80 locations around New York City's five boroughs: Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn,

Manhattan and Staten Island. NPL has a rich array of resources; electronic and paper-based, a modern and up-to-date web site featuring events and activities throughout the different branches and well-equipped reference areas. Considering the large amount of homeless people in New York City and the fact that the city has an extensive library network, it was assumed that homeless people will be using its services and facilities to a large extent.

Simmons (1985) was the first who sought to track the attitudes of public librarians towards the homeless population by looking at the literature addressing the "problem patron." Simmons looked at the response of public librarians to the increasing presence of homeless people in public libraries across the United States. His assessment of the attitudes of some librarians towards people who were in an obviously different social class is not entirely favorable. A few of the articles from the early nineties mentioned a landmark case in which a homeless man, Richard Kreimer, sued the Morristown, New Jersey Public Library because he was barred access for reasons connected to his homeless state (Cart 1992; Shuman 1996).

In 1990, The American Library Association, published its "Poor People's Policy," which states (policy 61)

The American Library Association promotes equal access to information for all persons, and recognizes the urgent need to respond to the increasing number of poor children, adults, and families in America. These people are affected by a combination of limitations, including illiteracy, illness, social isolation, homelessness, hunger, and discrimination, which hamper the effectiveness of traditional library services. Therefore it is crucial that libraries recognize their role in enabling poor people to participate fully in a democratic society, by utilizing a wide variety of available resources and strategies.

The purpose of this research is to study the existence of a possible gap between the ALA's "Poor People" mission statement and its practice in public libraries in New York City. The choice to focus on the New York City Public Libraries was a matter of convenience, due to a recent move to a new place of residence at the heart of Manhattan and the consequent close encounter with homeless people in the neighborhood. When one lives and works in Manhattan, homeless people are unfortunately a part of the city's view. They are on subways, street corners, parks and any other free access places such as the libraries around town.

This study focuses on three main questions:

- (1) What are the information needs of homeless people in New York City visiting public libraries across the city?
- (2) What types of public services do homeless people seek in New York City public libraries?
- (3) What are the current services offered to homeless people in public libraries across New York City?

3. Literature Review

Library literature related to library services to homeless people has yielded diverse opinions, action plans and general guidelines, mostly related to the librarians' coping abilities with the presence of homeless people in the libraries and how to prevent the public library from becoming a temporary shelter facility to the homeless. Few studies have explored the information needs and the use of the library for "library purposes" by homeless patrons.

The issue of information needs and technology usage by homeless patrons in libraries is rooted in the basic concept of civilian equal right to access of information and technology. For a homeless person, the only access to a computer and consequently to electronic information and the Internet is in most cases the public library. The library in this respect has a key role in bridging the "digital divide" that separates the users of networked information in the community along economic lines. Libraries can target local, technology-deprived groups by enabling access to technology via public access computing centers and the delivery of outreach support and training. In order to deliver technology related services to homeless people, the library staff and administration must be able to identify their unique needs, which are in most cases much different than those of any other user groups. When assessing the information needs and technology access rights of homeless people, two major issues come into play. One issue relates to the definition of the term "homeless," which is problematic in itself, since homeless people do not form a type of a homogeneous user group with specific information needs. Homeless veterans, for example will have different information needs than homeless families.

Another matter is the perceptual issue of "deserving" versus "undeserving" individuals or "worthy" versus "unworthy" users. Given the fact that it is tax payer money that sponsors library resources, including technology, there is a long running debate in the literature about whether or not homeless people who do not share other citizens' tax payments should be given equal access to services that are offered free.

The information needs of homeless patrons are scarcely mentioned in library literature today. Some exceptions include Hersberger's column (2005) that lists some every day information needs of homeless patrons based on several interviews, which include finances, relationships with others, child care, housing, health care, employment, education, transportation and publicly available assistance. These information-related needs have been articulated by different homeless groups and are closely related to their personal experience and prospects. The author encourages library students to be as active as possible in assessing the information needs of any identifiable user group. This, according to the author requires: "getting out from behind the desk and as needed, getting out of the library...asking users for input" (2005, 201).

Mark (1996), conducting empirical research on outreach programs for homeless children, lists the information needs of children in homeless shelters that can be met by a visit to or from the library. Homeless children may suffer from lack of attention and ability to focus due to their homeless status. These kids need, therefore, books or other literacy aids that will lengthen their ability to focus. They also need enrichment activities that involve reading aloud and active participation in discovery.

Silver (1996) surveys some major library initiatives throughout the United States designed to provide specialized services for homeless people. These projects and

initiatives were mostly reports on the implementation of services designed for homeless patrons. Among these projects is the New York Public Library initiative to bring the library to homeless youth in 1986. Behrmann *et al.* (1998), reported on a pilot outreach program that was set up in the Hotel Martinique, which hosted more than 1400 children. A depository collection of paperback books was created and branch librarians volunteered one morning a week for story telling, finger plays, and puppet shows.

Another project designed for homeless patrons was launched in 1998 by The Milwaukee Public Library. Working with representatives from a nearby day shelter, the library staff established a peer tutoring program. In addition, information about low-cost cultural events and employment possibilities was made available.

Silver also points to several other services and programs for the homeless such as referral services that guide the homeless to social service agencies offered in San Diego, Memphis and Fayetteville, North Carolina public libraries, libraries helping to establish reading rooms in shelters in Portland, Oregon and Milwaukee. The San Francisco Public Library issues library cards to the homeless and conducts story hours and film viewing at shelters (Walters, 1990). The Los Angeles Public Library actively assisted Project Open Door, which is a drop-in counseling agency in the building of 2000 volume lending library (Gordon, 1994). Doten (1989) reported on the intention of the public library of Haverhill, Massachusetts to include a day-care, winter garden and reading room for the homeless. This plan has not yet been materialized.

Hershenson (1992) described the Westchester library system initiative, titled "Libraries Help the Hungry," that aimed to collect foods at the libraries and then distribute the items to social service agencies. Carlson (1992) reported on a model program that was targeted for the Orangewood Children's home, a shelter for physically abused, neglected, and sexually molested children in California. The public library established fine-free library cards, taught children to be storytellers and puppeteers, and allowed each child to check out two books. Taylor (1992) describes the unique services provided for the homeless in Santa Monica, California where the library designated a special area in which homeless people can network and attend cultural events as well as read and use networked computers.

However, real conflict exists among the rights of the homeless and the rights of other patrons and library workers. For hygienic reasons, patrons may feel uncomfortable handling materials that the homeless have handled. As a result, many librarians classify the homeless as "problem patrons". Shuman (1989) gives a broad definition of a problem patron as "anyone who is doing anything illegal, immoral, annoying, or upsetting to anyone else" Shuman (1996, 6) goes on to explain that "a problem patron is anyone who visits the library and either breaks or flouts existing rules, or presents an actual or potential threat to other persons within the building." Because of their disheveled appearance, however, it is easier to assume that the homeless person is a problem.

Another assumption is that because a homeless person might be mentally ill and acting a little odd, such behavior is itself cause for concern. Some librarians have complained that the profession is not meant to encompass social work (Morris 1986; Rhodes 1983; Vocino 1976; Zipkowitz 1990). In fact, some highly negative attitudes about helping people in this helping profession have come to light in these closed-minded articles. Some examples:

For the good of the common peace, these people's antisocial behavior cannot be accepted, regardless of the socioeconomic circumstances that may cause such behavior. We are not social workers; we are librarians (Manley, 1991).

The experience of large urban libraries suggests that procedures need to be developed for easing loiterers, sleepers, panhandlers, and smelly, individuals out of the library (Morris, 1986).

Open access to all. An admirable philosophy, but at what point does a public servant become a public slave? (Easton, 1977).

Turns my stomach to look at them. There ought to be a limit to what librarians are asked to do to serve people. No one wants to see them. They should be put back where they came from, out of sight (Anonymous librarian on the mentally ill to Zipkowitz, 1990, 54).

Despite the harshness of these words, one must see their legitimacy. Many people, not just librarians, find it uncomfortable to work with people who have any type of abnormal behavior or looks. A librarian usually does not have the appropriate training to deal with users who in addition to having distinctive bodily odors and hygiene problems may also have deep rooted problems of mental illness, disturbing behavior patterns and so on. Turner (1993) advocates using a common sense approach to evaluating each problem situation on a case-by-case basis. The library's code of conduct becomes the measuring stick by which behavior is rated, but allows for the librarian's individual judgment concerning the best way to handle a situation. As Turner concludes: "Part of common sense ... is accepting people, even mentally disabled people, for who and what they are, and dealing with them on their own terms" (1993, 37).

Although most of the professional literature focuses exclusively on identifying problem behaviors of the homeless in the library, some authors provide concrete solutions. Simmons (1985) notes that there are two ways of implementing solutions: reactive and proactive. Reactive solutions tend to be slightly negative and focus on the library itself. Solutions are created and implemented internally and include hiring security staff and writing a clearly stated code of conduct. Other useful solutions include keeping an incident or behavior log on a problematic person, which can be used later to secure a court order preventing that person from using the library (Turner 1993), or documenting health problems resulting from a homeless person's lack of physical hygiene (Rhodes 1988).

This special population needs the kind of attention and respect that is being given to other special populations such as minorities among others. Libraries can work with other agencies to provide services to the homeless, and to help them find alternative places in addition to the library in which to spend their days. Simmons states (1995, 117):

Traditionally the information contained by the library has been used for social change, but ironically, the role of the library as an active agent in social change rarely has emanated from within the agency itself... perhaps because librarians are guilty in lacking the spirit of advocacy.

4. Methodology

This study used unobtrusive observation of nine reference areas in public libraries belonging to the NYPL network around the city. Permission to conduct unobtrusive observation was sought from and granted by the Long Island University Institutional Review Board prior to the conduct of this study.

4.1 Selecting the libraries for this research

The libraries visited were initially chosen according to the neighborhood in which they are located. Poor areas of New York City were selected at first, assuming that the homeless population in these areas would be higher than those in richer neighborhoods. It was also initially presumed that in poorer areas of the city, homeless patrons would be using the public library to a greater extent than in other, more prominent areas of the city. This first round of observations in these neighborhoods did not yield any of the expected results. A month of observations in these libraries did not yield any results, because no homeless patron was seen in the library's reference area on any visit. A realization that the libraries observed might not be the ones visited by homeless people and lack of knowledge of which libraries were more widely used by homeless patrons led to the need to learn more about which libraries are used by homeless patrons.

Casual conversations with a social worker serving homeless people in New York City revealed a few interesting facts that led to a change of the research course. According to the social worker, who has been working with homeless people in NY City for the past 20+ years, homeless people were to a large extent unwelcome in public libraries around the city. Furthermore, according to her, unless a person demonstrated adequate physical hygiene, no signs of mental illness and a clear purpose of library usage, he or she was usually removed from the premises by either the security guard or the police. Reluctance of the social worker to elaborate on these incidents and refusal to grant an interview led to an extensive attempt to find other sources of information regarding the presence of homeless patrons in the libraries to discover where they are being tolerated and can be observed.

An independent organization assisting homeless people in New York City was contacted both by email and telephone and conversations with two of the organization's employees led to a significant breakthrough in the research progress. The employees listed four libraries where homeless patrons were welcomed and could be observed in the public reference area. Acting on this valuable information, these libraries were therefore visited during the second month of the research. Homeless patrons were observed in these libraries and their use of library resources and services was recorded accordingly.

4.2 Recording homeless patrons' library use

While in the library, the main reference area was scanned at first in order to try to identify homeless patrons by observing physical and external characteristics. Physical characteristics included old or worn-down clothing, inappropriate dress for the weather (i.e. warm clothing on a hot day), heavily stained or extremely dirty clothes, torn or old footwear, untidy grooming for men (i.e. long untidy facial hair), long, dirty and untidy hair, dirty fingernails and odor of an unwashed body. Other external characteristics included the presence of multiple bags (plastic, backpacks or both) that look over-packed.

When a person was identified as having one or more of these characteristics, a brief look into what they were doing was taken in order not to raise suspicion or anger. Seated close by pretending to read and summarize material from the reference area, hand-written notes

were taken. These notes included the date, time and location of the library, the number of homeless people identified and the activities that they were engaged in. Included in these notes was also a general observation of the librarians present at the reference area, the work-related tasks they were performing and whether or not they were engaged in any interaction with the homeless patrons on site. Additional observations included the security guards present in each library. The security guards' behavior towards the homeless is extremely important because they have the authority to allow or ban a person from entering the public library.

During these visits there was no attempt to engage in a conversation with the staff members or the homeless patrons. All notes were taken while pretending to be occupied in normal library use such as scanning magazines and reading reference books or while using the computers in the computer area and writing information down off the screen. Different reference areas were observed and activities recorded through the adult reference area including the newspapers and magazines area, computer area and book stacks. The children's area was scanned as well while engaging my child in the library's children's sections.

4.3 Leaving the reference area

The reference areas were scanned for an average of three to five hours on each visit, usually until 15 minutes before closing time. Pretending to realize the time, the notes were gathered together and a book or two were borrowed on my way out in order to make sure that coming back there for a second or third visit would not be noticed as unusual.

Off the scene, a short summary of what was observed was written in order to notice recurring patterns of information related activities noticed while in the library. Because the field notes included general observations not specifically related to the information seeking and usage of library resources by homeless people, it was important to isolate the information related activities from other observed behaviors, attitudes and feelings derived from these observations.

5. Research constraints

This research was done using unobtrusive observations of reference areas in 10 out of 80 New York City public libraries. Since the people observed could not be approached, talked to or interviewed, the judgment of whether a person is homeless was entirely the call of the researcher. This may have led to instances where a person regarded as homeless is actually of low-income but has permanent housing. Furthermore, in order to avoid any contact with the people involved and remain impartial regarding their activities, each instance could only be observed for several minutes in order not to raise suspicion and negative reactions. Therefore, a closer or detailed examination of what people were engaged in could not be done and only a general statement of the activity could be provided here.

The research was also done during summer time when the weather allows homeless patrons to stay out most of the time. Two instances of a rainy day and a day of extreme heat were the only exceptions. It may be that performing the research in winter time when temperatures drop dramatically would have yielded different results than those presented here. Due to the limited amount of time that could be devoted to this research, each library was visited twice, usually once during the week and once on a weekend. This could also have affected the findings.

6. Findings

Observations of the reference areas in public libraries around New York City began on July 7, 2006. In retrospect, the findings could be divided into two phases. The first phase began with a selected list of five libraries that were chosen prior to the observations. These libraries were selected according to the neighborhoods in which they are located. The selection was based on the assumption that the mostly likely libraries to serve homeless people would be in low-income neighborhoods of New York City. The list of 80 libraries appearing on The New York Public Library website (www.nypl.org) was therefore scanned and the five libraries were chosen according to their addresses. These libraries will be referred to as Library A, B, C, D, and E.

On July 7th and 8th, Library A was visited during normal opening hours (noon-6p.m.). This first visit, as the others that followed it during the first phase of the research, did not yield any significant observations of homeless patrons using the library's facilities. Although homeless people were seen dwelling around the crossing streets from the library, none entered it. The first thing to be noticed was a security guard who was seated at the entrance of the library, close to the main reference area with a full view of the front door and the reference area. The reference area itself was occupied by about 20 people, none of which were carrying heavy bags or had any characteristic of a homeless person. Most of the visitors were older people, probably retired, who were reading newspapers, magazines and books located at the reference area. Some people were looking up items on the library catalog and people were also talking to the library's employees. The reference librarian was answering questions people had about books they were interested in and how to order them. After four hours during which no homeless person was seen entering the library or attempting to do so, the observation was ended for the day. In order to be able to compare observations on week days and weekends, the same library was visited again on Saturday. Opening hours during the weekend are also different than during the week. This visit did not yield any results either.

The following week, while visiting a different library, which was not a part of the research list, on a heavy rain day, an incident involving a homeless person was observed. This library (that we shall refer to as Library X) is located in an area where numerous homeless people can be seen sleeping on street corners and benches and begging for money or food. On that particular day, a homeless person was observed trying to find shelter from the rain in the local library. Carrying numerous plastic bags, and wearing dirty clothes, unshaved and badly groomed, this person looked homeless. The security guard who usually sits between the front door and the reference area, asked him for the purpose of his visit to the library and when he couldn't give a coherent answer she asked him to leave. He attempted to protest, and was asked to show his NYC library card. When he failed to show one, he was escorted out. This incident served as a catalyst for change later in the research and triggered phase two.

The second library on the list was visited the same week of the above incident on Friday and Saturday (July 14th – 15th) during normal opening hours. These visits, as those before did not yield any results as far as observing homeless patrons using the library. None were observed entering the library. This library, as the all the others mentioned above, had a security guard at the entrance at all times during operation hours.

At this point, it was suspected that the presence of a security guard was connected to the fact that homeless people were not entering the library. A need to shed some light over this issue became clear. Fortunately, an opportunity to do so presented itself by coincidence. While chatting with a friend, she revealed her professional background as a social worker specializing in services to the homeless for the past 20 years. The conversation revealed that indeed, security guards were placed in public libraries to deal with the large amount of people seeking shelter from the streets in public libraries. She mentioned that homeless people being removed from the streets and parks around the city were finding a place to bathe and sleep in public libraries. This phenomenon became a problem since many of these homeless people are also mentally ill, which created a threat to other patrons in libraries. Security guards were placed in libraries in order to keep the library a safe place for all people to use. They have the authority to turn away anyone who seems to be a threat to the public. She recommended talking to her manager who would be able to provide more information about the library services that homeless people do have and the types of programs offered to them. The attempt to contact the manager and solicit an interview failed and a different path was needed in order to make progress. While attempting to contact the manager, Libraries C and D were visited. Each library was visited twice on a two week stretch. These visits, again, proved to be fruitless.

Once it was clear that an interview with the social worker would not be granted, a new way to tackle the subject was needed. One of the most interesting phenomena mentioned on library and general news is blogs by and about homeless people¹. Being an online diary, blogs maintained by homeless people can shed light on their day to day experiences and lives. Moreover, the fact that a homeless person will maintain a blog means that he or she must use a networked computer, which in most cases will be located in a public facility such as a library. Following this path, a number of blogs² maintained by homeless people were closely read. These blogs provided valuable information regarding organizations serving homeless people, links to other web sites containing contacts, shelters, municipal assistance, housing etc. A short analysis of these blogs yielded a list of some non profit organizations assisting the homeless. One of these organizations, located and serving homeless people in New York City was contacted by using the list of people on its web site. After a few attempts of email and phone calls, a person working there was contacted and agreed to a short phone conversation. During this conversation he confirmed the social worker's statements regarding homeless people being unwelcome in most libraries. He clarified though, that this was more so in local neighborhood libraries and listed four other libraries that he knew to be tolerant towards homeless people. These libraries will be referred to as libraries F, G, H, and I. He suggested visiting them in order to be able to observe homeless people in a library setting.

This conversation opened what shall be called; phase two of observations in this research. Following the leads provided by the gatekeeper, the newly added libraries were visited during the months of August. The observations during these visits yielded interesting results regarding the use of libraries' facilities and services by homeless people.

Library F was visited during normal operating hours on Friday. The main reference area was occupied by at least six homeless people, judging from their shabby clothes and unshaved faces and the fact that they had several bags next to the table where they were seating. Most of them were sleeping at the last table.

One of the men was at the computer attempting to apply for the library *Access* card. The *Access* card, as opposed to the regular library card, allows researchers to request and use materials from the Research Libraries' closed stacks as well as print materials on the library's networked printers³. The librarian was explaining to him that he needs two valid identification documents, one of which has to carry a current photo. Since he didn't have those at the time, he was asked to apply for a card at another time.

The *Access* card allows library patrons have access to databases and to order research materials. The library analyzes all requests and searches in order to develop its collections. It is difficult to determine whether he knew the difference between the regular library card and the *Access* card. The librarian who assisted him did not ask whether he had a library card. Nonetheless, it was notable that he was interested in access to the computers in the reference room.

The next library to be visited that day was Library G. In the main reference area there was no sign of any homeless patrons. Most of the people there were young college students and teenagers. At the children's reference area a mother and her three children were seated on a small benched area. Their belongings were with them and included multiple backpacks. The mother and the young child were sleeping while the other two, one looking about eight- or nine-years old and the other a teenager, were playing around the empty reference area. The children didn't seem to be interested in materials at the reference area, which is equipped with computers, audio books, a big children's book collection and games. Worth noting is the fact that although the mother and children looked as though they did not have a home and the mother and young child were sleeping, none of the librarians in the reference area that were seated behind their desk attempted to engage these children in any activity. It seemed as though they were passing time in the library until they had to leave.

Library H was visited in the middle of the following week during opening hours. This library offered story book reading for children that day. At the children's reference room, the children's librarian selected a few picture books to be read out loud to the children. Arriving there almost for the story telling to begin, three mothers with kids of different ages were seen there. These families seemed not to have any permanent residence, as they carried several bags and the mothers and children looked as if they hadn't changed their clothes for some time. The children's librarian was reading picture books to the kids. Three small kids, ages two- to four-years old were sitting quietly, fascinated by the librarian's story telling. He engaged them in the story, asking questions and letting them complete sentences.

The older kids, mostly teenagers who seemed between six- and thirteen-years old, were occupying all computers in the reference area. About three teenagers were sitting at each workstation, writing messages on myspace.com. *MySpace* is a social networking website based offering an interactive, user-submitted network of blogs, profiles, groups, photos, MP3s, videos, and an internal e-mail system. This website is known to be popular with teenagers and young adults. The children were engaged in exchanging messages and writing as well as conversing happily and enthusiastically with their friends seated next to them. They all seemed to know each other, including the mothers who were seated with the younger children.

After story time was done, the main reference area was observed. Three homeless people were sitting at the tables. One of them, looking also a little unstable, was reading a book

to himself in a quiet voice. He seemed to be dramatizing the content that he was reading. Another homeless patron was engaged in writing. He was highly focused on the writing. He had several library journals next to him. The paper in front of him was almost full and looked like a paper or letter. He was occasionally taking a look at *Library Journal* next to him. The third person was at the magazines area reading a newspaper. From a distance it looked like *The New York Times*.

Two homeless people (again judging by their general looks) were sitting at the computers. One was looking reading through the H.U.D. web site, assisted by the reference librarian. This web site is maintained by the US department of housing and urban development and its mission is: "to increase homeownership, support community development and increase access to affordable housing free from discrimination."⁴ From what could be seen without intrusion, it looked as though the man was looking for housing finance solutions. He was printing some application forms and a list of documents that were probably needed for it. The librarian assisted him in printing information that he needed.

Another homeless patron was using the online library catalog. With only a brief look at the screen, a list of books could be seen.

Library F was revisited during the Friday of that same week along with library I. In library F, two homeless patrons were seen in the reference area. Both of them were sleeping at the back of the reference room. One of them was sleeping with his head over a newspaper that he was probably reading before. At library I, there were no homeless patrons seen.

Library X was revisited the following week. At this library there are a few shelves stocked with books for sale, which are located at the entrance. These books are sold for a range of a few cents to \$1 each. On that particular day, a homeless person was seen walking in and browsing through the 50-cent books. He picked three books from the shelf and was leaving with them without paying. The security guard on site did not attempt to stop him and let him go with the books. A few hours later, the same man was seen seated at a street corner, trying to sell for a few dollars the books he took from the library.

The same week, Libraries G and H were visited during the week at different hours of operations. At Library G, there were no homeless patrons at the time of the visit. At Library H, a man and a child who looked homeless were seen sitting at the computer workstation in the children's reference room. The child, who looked nine- or ten-years old, was explaining a game he was playing to the man who was probably his father. The game looked colorful and images of fairies and children could be seen on the screen. From what could be seen, the game belonged to the library since the case was put next to the computer. The child was playing for over an hour and then switched to the Internet. He read from the Disney channel web site and was excited to find a sweepstake offering at the site that invited children writing to the stars and receiving a vacation at Disney. At this point he was trying to sign up and enter the site so he could participate in the offering.

Library F was revisited briefly the following week for about two hours. On this visit a homeless person was dwelling aimlessly in the upstairs area where several display items are to be seen. He was walking from one display box to the other but did not enter the reference areas.

7. Summary of Findings

From the above narration several information-related behaviors of homeless people are noticeable:

1. Freely available materials such as books, magazines and newspapers located at the reference areas are used by homeless patrons. These materials are used for reading and as reference sources for writing.
2. Networked information such as the Internet and online catalogs are used to locate vital information such as housing or to browse through materials available on the library network.
3. Teenagers use the computers located in the children reference area for social networking, writing and games.
4. Young children benefit from story time and age appropriate activities provided free of charge by the library. Children also use the computers for games and acquiring information of interest to them off the internet.

8. Conclusions

Despite the impression drawn from the library literature that homeless people use the library mostly for refuge and often use its facilities to sleep and bathe, and that they are a disturbance to the staff, the observations in this research reveal mixed findings. On one hand, several homeless people were seen sleeping in the reference area of one of the libraries. One was even asked to wash in the public lavatory before entering the public area. On the other hand, several groups of homeless patrons were observed using both library resources and facilities for library use. Reading, writing, browsing the online catalog, and surfing the internet were some of the activities homeless adults were involved in. Children and teens were observed using the computers for online social networking, games and surfing the Internet for pleasure. Young children were seen at story time hour enjoying an enrichment activity in the company of other children their age.

The New York Public Library has good information resources for the homeless that can be found on their web site⁵. Nonetheless, this information is difficult to locate on the web site and requires in-depth knowledge of its content. None of the libraries visited had any visible directions on how to access this information or a publicly posted notice that such information is available on the web site. A homeless patron walking into a library branch has no way of knowing that information such as housing, family resources and municipal assistance is within reach. In libraries where homeless people were seen using the resources available at the reference area, assistance was asked for and not provided without a direct question posed to the librarian by the homeless patron. Having this information in a more visible location on the main page could be beneficial to homeless patrons using the computers in the reference areas. In addition, noticing homeless patrons dwelling aimlessly or sitting at the reference area without using any facility available should provoke some reaction on the part of the librarians. It may be that if asked or even introduced to the employment, housing, public pantries and other resources available, the

librarian would serve the homeless person who might not even know that he can obtain such valuable information.

The NYPL also has active programs designed for low-income, homeless, elderly and immigrant persons residing in New York City. The library recruits volunteers for many of its activities, such as children's story times, elderly book clubs, etc. These programs and activities are provided in the local branch libraries rather than the research libraries. One of these programs, called *New York Cares* is especially designed for organized visits to the library with children and teens from shelters. Other programs include literacy and computer tutoring. These offerings are in line with what was observed in the research. Teens and children are interested in using the computers in the library and probably benefit greatly from the organized visits to the library where they can be introduced to the resources available to them. Story time offerings as well, are used by homeless patrons and their children as an educating and stimulating activity. These programs prove that the New York Public Library is active in providing services for low income and homeless people.

Nonetheless, on a day-to-day basis, there was no sign of active involvement on the part of the librarians and staff to approach homeless patrons unsolicited and ask if they are in need of services or to introduce the readily available resources to them. This was true not only with regard to adult homeless people, but also with regard to children and teens who seemed to be indifferent to the resources available to them, while playing in the children's reference room. Although it is understood that such proactive approach requires an effort that the librarian is not obliged to do as a part of daily work, it would probably made a big difference to the homeless person, whether a child or an adult, at the library. This echoes Hersberger (2005) who encourages library staff to actively look for homeless patron input about their information needs.

9. Further research

Further research is needed on multiple levels. First, a follow up set of observations is required in a different time of the year, preferably winter when the harsh New York City weather might draw more homeless people to the libraries. The relatively small number of homeless patrons observed in this study may be due to the fact that it was done during the summer when the weather is relatively comfortable and a homeless person can find refuge in a park or a street corner.

Interviews with homeless patrons at the library are also important in order to obtain in-depth understanding of the type of information they are looking for and the materials that they are using or would like to be able to use. The same applies for interviews with the librarians at library locations where homeless people are seen. From librarians it is important to understand what type of assistance request they receive from homeless people and how they meet these needs with what is available to them. Combining the input from librarians and homeless patrons can shed light on future programs and services needed in order to meet the information needs of homeless patrons.

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End Notes

¹ <http://www.villagevoice.com/news/0350,baard,49233.8.html>

² <http://thehomelessguy.blogspot.com/>

³ <http://www.nypl.org/research/general/about.html>

⁴ <http://www.hud.gov/library/bookshelf12/hudmission.cfm>

⁵ <http://www.nypl.org/links/index.cfm?Trg=1&d1=1644&d3=Homelessness>