

# Public Libraries and the Social Inclusion of Homeless People: A Literature Review

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## Abstract

Public libraries have an ethical and professional responsibility to create an inclusive and welcoming environment for their entire patron community, including those individuals experiencing homelessness, in part by providing equal and equitable access to information and library services. This literature review examines the small but growing body of LIS literature—both internationally and in the Canadian context—on the self-reported informational and social needs of people experiencing homelessness, and their use of public libraries. Key findings reveal that while some homeless people use public library spaces to meet basic physiological needs, most visit public libraries for many of the same reasons as their housed counterparts. Importantly, homeless library users indicated that spending time at the library contributed to their sense of belonging and social inclusion. The literature also demonstrated a clear trend toward partnerships between public libraries and professional support agencies to better address patrons' needs. Services relevant to homeless people should be developed in consultation or collaboration with this target group to ensure that resulting recommendations are appropriate to their needs, reduce or remove barriers to equal access, and contribute positively to social inclusion.

*Keywords:* Homelessness, information needs, social inclusion, Canada, public libraries, library services, public spaces, social participation.

Homeless people have the right to participate fully in a democratic society through equal and equitable access to information and library services (ALA, 2006; Hodgetts et al., 2008; Kosmicki, 2020), but often face a range of barriers that deny or abridge these rights and thus perpetuate social exclusion (IFLA, 2017). Most relevant research in this area has focused on the opinions and perspectives of library staff members (Anderson et al., 2012; Giesler, 2017; Torrey et al., 2009), while the voices of people experiencing homelessness have rarely been included in the library discourse

on their needs. Provence (2018) observes that library services for people experiencing homelessness, “when they exist, for the most part have been designed *for* them rather than *with* them” (p. 1060). Considered to be one of the last free public spaces, libraries are uniquely positioned to help meet the needs of patrons experiencing homelessness and, in doing so, facilitate equal access and promote social inclusion.

While Canadian libraries are developing partnerships to provide services to this population, individuals experiencing homelessness are not being systematically consulted about their needs. A database search of the peer-reviewed literature of the past twenty years revealed eleven published studies that specifically included the input of people experiencing homelessness about their use of public libraries. Of these, five were from the United States (Hersberger, 2001, 2005; Kelleher, 2013; Mi et al., 2014; Provence et al., 2021), three from New Zealand (Dowdell & Liew, 2019; Hodgetts et al., 2008; Zhang & Chawner, 2018), one from the United Kingdom (Muggleton & Ruthven, 2010), and one from France (Gaudet, 2013). Research on how public libraries support the self-reported needs of patrons experiencing homelessness in Canada remains an under-studied area, with only one scholarly study in the Canadian context (Richter et al., 2019). Next, the references of each article found were searched in order to locate additional sources, revealing a conference paper (Skinner, 2016), a book chapter reporting on the results of a case study of a public library in a large urban area (Winkelstein, 2019), and an article in a professional publication (Giudice, 2017), all from the United States. In total, the search process uncovered 14 resources published from 2001 to 2021.

This literature review begins with current demographic information about homelessness in Canada, explores the role of public libraries in meeting the information and services needs of homeless library patrons, discusses barriers to equal access and considerations when targeting public library services for people experiencing homelessness, and concludes with an overview of field research on homeless people’s use of public libraries from their own point of view.

## **Homelessness in Canada**

Homelessness is a broad term that encompasses a range of specific housing situations and temporal dimensions (Echenberg & Munn-Rivard, 2020). For many

people, homelessness is not a static state but rather a fluid experience, where one's shelter or housing circumstances may shift frequently. Homelessness may also be understood within a continuum of physical living situations—from *absolute homelessness*, that is, sleeping on the street or in places not intended for human habitation, or in emergency shelters, to *hidden homelessness*, for example, 'couchsurfing' with friends or family, and finally, to *relative homelessness*, which is living in substandard shelter and/or being at risk of losing one's home (Gaetz et al., 2017).

Echenberg and Munn-Rivard (2020) note the challenges of enumerating a population "that lacks a permanent address or fixed location, that includes many 'hidden homeless,' and that is always in flux, as individuals move in and out of homelessness" (p. 6). Point in Time (PiT) counts offer an unduplicated measure on a single night of the people in a given community who are experiencing absolute homelessness (Government of Canada, 2021). A nationally coordinated Canadian PiT count, which took place in 2018, reported that "on a given night, more than 25,000 people were experiencing absolute homelessness in shelters or unsheltered locations in 61 communities across Canada" (Echenberg & Munn-Rivard, 2020, p. 9). However, actual numbers of Canadians experiencing homelessness may potentially be much higher, as PiT snapshots estimate only absolute homelessness, due to difficulties associated with measuring hidden or relative homelessness (Echenberg & Munn-Rivard, 2020; Gaetz et al., 2017).

Visible homelessness is highly stigmatized because mainstream Canadian society views it as a form of social deviance or personal moral failing (IFLA, 2017; Zhang & Chawner, 2018). Overcoming these prejudices is necessary to increase understanding of homelessness and to "allow libraries to offer more efficient and sustainable services for all users, regardless of their social and living status, in keeping with the mission of a public library to provide equitable services to all members of its community" (Zhang & Chawner, 2018, p. 281).

## **Role of Public Libraries**

Public libraries are "perhaps the last remaining indoor public spaces where an individual can remain from opening until closing without needing any reason to be there

and without having to spend any money” (Barclay, 2017, pp. 270-271). For people experiencing homelessness, libraries are a welcoming and free public space offering shelter from inclement weather, washroom facilities, and safety (Anderson et al., 2012; Dowdell & Liew, 2019; Hodgetts et al., 2008; Kelleher, 2013; Winkelstein, 2019; Zhang & Chawner, 2018). However, presenting public libraries as a refuge in a purely physical sense seriously underestimates the role that they can play in the lives of people experiencing homelessness (Muggleton, 2013). Homeless people also access and use a range of library resources and, as such, public libraries are increasingly partnering with local service providers to meet the diverse needs of this heterogeneous user group.

Moxley and Abbas (2016) describe public libraries functioning as “community anchors for at-risk and vulnerable populations” through their potential for collaboration with social agencies to deliver services to people experiencing homelessness (p. 311). While public library staff recognize the importance of collaboration with social service agencies that serve the unhoused population (Giesler, 2017), approaches to meeting the needs of library users experiencing homelessness tend to be largely organic in nature and not formalized in policy or procedure (Anderson et al., 2012; Giesler, 2017).

Library staff have reported challenges in balancing the needs of varied library user groups when some, such as those experiencing homelessness, present with distinct and often complex needs that place considerable demands on libraries (Dowdell & Liew, 2019; Torrey et al., 2009), and that library staff report as being beyond the scope of their knowledge, skills, and training (Aykanian et al., 2019). To address this issue, Anderson et al. (2012) recommend the development of training programs to enable library staff to liaise effectively with professional support organizations and link homeless patrons with service providers. Likewise, Richter et al. (2019) suggest that library staff may “play a pivotal role for socially vulnerable users as conduits to community services” (p. 437).

A growing LIS literature recognizes the value of partnering with social agencies to better address patrons’ needs (Aykanian et al., 2020; Moxley & Abbas, 2016; Provence, 2018; Wahler et al., 2020). For example, in 2009, the San Francisco Public Library became the first North American library to hire a social worker as a long-term solution addressing the well-being of its most vulnerable library patrons (Giesler, 2019).

Wahler et al. (2020) note the overlapping goals between social work and the work of public libraries, and make several recommendations for partnerships that will more effectively serve library patrons with unmet psychosocial needs. Collins et al. (2009) describe how a San Jose, California library collaborated with several social service agencies to provide *pro bono* legal services, employment workshops, and health services information for homeless people, as well as to provide training designed to help library staff more confidently and compassionately address the needs of homeless patrons. Similarly, Eموke (2015) describes how the Toronto Public Library has partnered with Toronto Public Health to provide in-branch public health nurses who assist library patrons in connecting with mental health and addiction resources. Some libraries have hired formerly homeless peer support specialists to supplement the efforts of social workers in providing support to homeless library patrons; people in these roles have first-hand experience in dealing with these services themselves, giving them insight into which resources and programs may be most useful (Kelleher, 2013; Skinner, 2016).

### **Social Inclusion and Barriers to Access**

Public libraries are, in the ideal sense, inclusive public spaces that try to meet the unique needs of the communities they serve (Lankes, 2016). The American Library Association's *Library Services to the Poor* (2006) policy and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions' (IFLA) *Guidelines for Library Services to People Experiencing Homelessness* (2017) promote equal access to information and libraries' role in enabling all patrons' full participation in a democratic society. This places a professional and moral responsibility on library staff to advocate for the information rights of people experiencing poverty and homelessness, and to create an inclusive and welcoming public library environment (ALA, 2006; Aykanian et al., 2020; Hodgetts et al., 2008).

For many people experiencing homelessness, the public library is a neutral, safe space that can offer a sense of inclusion in the community, a place where they can be ordinary citizens participating in ordinary everyday activities, such as reading the newspaper or using the computer (Dowdell & Liew, 2019; Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012;

Skinner, 2016). In interviews with homeless adults, Richter et al. (2019) found that when people experiencing homelessness use the public space of the library, “they go from being invisible to being visible, active participants of society” and, in doing so, assert public acceptability. These findings echo those of Hodgetts et al. (2008), who found that occupying public spaces, such as public libraries, allows people experiencing homelessness to resist exclusionary practices and perceptions of ‘otherness.’

Reducing barriers to access can result in a “feeling of legitimacy for a homeless person who is not welcome in many other public arenas” (Kelleher, 2013, p. 23). The requirement of having a permanent address to obtain a library card presents a significant barrier to access for homeless individuals (Dowdell & Liew, 2019). Similarly, overdue fines and fees for public computer use are an equity issue, disproportionately affecting low-income patrons and those experiencing homelessness (Collins et al., 2009; Kelleher, 2013). Library policies such as those related to offensive odours, carrying large bags or bedrolls, sleeping in the library, or other conduct policies can also be seen as implicitly discriminatory towards homeless people (Provence, 2018; Richter et al., 2019; Winkelstein, 2019). Patron behaviour policies that impact access to information should be clearly outlined and equally enforced (Hersberger, 2005). However, the attitudes and biases of staff and other library patrons often present the most significant barriers for equal access to public library services (Giesler, 2017; IFLA, 2019; Kelleher, 2013). Hersberger (2005) criticizes the tendency of some librarians to label homeless users as ‘problem patrons,’ noting that such discriminatory stereotyping can lead to action, or inaction, that excludes homeless people, and may cause them to believe that they are not welcome in public libraries.

### **Developing Inclusive Public Library Services**

People experiencing homelessness are not a monolithic or homogeneous group and encompass a spectrum of ages, genders, ethnicities, and reasons for becoming homeless (Echenberg & Munn-Rivard, 2020; Kosmicki, 2020; Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012). Accordingly, each person who comes to the library is a unique individual with their own concerns and needs. For instance, “homeless veterans... might have very different information needs and service needs than homeless families” (Hersberger, 2005, p. 199). It is important not to make assumptions about the needs of homeless

people based on this one facet of their circumstance. Providing services to people experiencing homelessness may challenge library staff understandings of what homelessness looks like; for example, early in the efforts of the Dallas Public Library to engage homeless individuals, a GED class was assumed to be a programming priority—a misconception confronted when a survey of their homeless patrons revealed that many had college degrees (Giudice, 2017).

When developing public library initiatives for homeless people, libraries must consider whether framing these programs and services in terms of homelessness is actually helpful or necessary. Muggleton (2013) cautions against Othering homeless people through targeted services, noting that “there is a significant risk that, by developing initiatives specifically targeting homeless people, a dichotomy develops whereby homeless library users are perceived as distinct from non-homeless library users” (p. 12). Given the stigmatization associated with homelessness, accessing initiatives explicitly targeting the homeless may ‘out’ those who would prefer to dissociate themselves from that label or otherwise create unnecessary obstacles (Muggleton, 2013). Instead, libraries seeking to achieve greater social equity aim to incorporate a diversity of identities and experiences reflective of the diversity of the community itself into generalized and inclusive programming (Kosmicki, 2020; Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012).

Public library services for people experiencing homelessness include both off-site outreach programs as well as in-library service design and delivery (Giesler, 2017). For example, Toronto Public Library’s Bookmobile Shelter Outreach program, which visits family shelters, engaged with close to 500 shelter residents over a three-year period (Emoke, 2015; Hepburn, 2018). Likewise, Wong (2009) describes how the San Francisco Public Library offered story times and movie screenings at shelters for homeless children. Forming these types of alliances allows library programs to be held in locations more convenient for attendees (Zhang & Chawner, 2018), a partial solution to the transportation issues identified by Hersberger (2001).

Generalized in-library services and programming inclusive of people experiencing homelessness may include information and digital literacy classes

(Dowdell & Liew, 2019; Skinner, 2016); legal services (Collins et al., 2009; Kosmicki, 2020); job and life skill programs, movie screenings (Collins et al., 2009; Skinner, 2016); children's storytimes, reader's advisory, parenting concerns, teen events, book clubs or discussion groups, and author visits (Kosmicki, 2020). Many of the programs already provided by public libraries can be helpful to the homeless population, with just a few minor adjustments. For example, Collins et al. (2009) noted that the library's computer skills classes typically include information on computer basics, software, and Internet use; to customize the content to the needs of people experiencing homelessness, the workshop might focus on practical skills, such as how to find employment opportunities or how to locate resources on local government agency websites. Providing generalized library services and programming, rather than targeted services, supports social inclusion by increasing homeless individuals' opportunities for interaction and participation in everyday activities as equal citizens (Dowdell & Liew, 2019; Gaudet, 2013; Hodgetts et al., 2008; Provence, 2018).

Other researchers stress the importance of consultation and collaboration with target groups to ensure their needs are included when planning library services (Giesler, 2017; Muggleton, 2013; Provence, 2018). The IFLA *Guidelines* (2017) suggest that libraries planning to provide services for people experiencing homelessness conduct an assessment of needed resources and programs. This needs assessment should include direct interaction with people experiencing homelessness to ensure that resulting recommendations will benefit and be relevant to these patrons (IFLA, 2017; Provence, 2018). Unfortunately, the literature indicates that this approach is still relatively uncommon. An IFLA (2017) survey of fifty public libraries worldwide revealed only four libraries that specifically mentioned a needs assessment that included direct interaction with people experiencing homelessness. All four discussed establishing relationships with patrons experiencing homelessness as their primary method of determining how the library can best meet the needs of the communities it serves, including homeless persons in general. Vancouver Public Library, for example, encourages its library staff to regularly spend time where homeless people gather, such as shelters and food banks, while staff of the Multnomah County Library frequently visit social service agencies to chat with people using the services and deliver resource



materials (IFLA, 2017). Other research acknowledges the challenges of recruitment, pointing out that the stigma associated with homelessness requires sensitivity in approaching patrons (Provence, 2018; Skinner, 2016). To overcome this difficulty, the Forsyth Public Library administered its survey to all patrons, with a question about residence with a response option of 'no permanent address,' thereby allowing them to identify the needs of homeless patrons without the risk of offending patrons (Skinner, 2016).

## **Field Research in the LIS Literature**

Studies from Western countries on the use of public libraries by homeless people from their own point of view are sparse but help to show the varied reasons why people experiencing homelessness use public libraries. In the U.S., Hersberger (2001) interviewed homeless parents ( $n = 28$ ) living in family shelters and identified their top general and information needs as related to finances (96%), childcare (82%), employment (76%), and long-term housing (75%). Hersberger's (2005) research also revealed the importance of sequence when addressing the information needs of the homeless. For example, some homeless parents may be seeking information on employment, but a list of jobs might be useless information without a public transit schedule or information on affordable childcare (Hersberger, 2005). Mi et al. (2014) found that the 22 homeless adults interviewed in their research expressed a wide range of health information needs and reported accessing health or medical information via the Internet, often using the computers available at the public library. Another study on the topic surveyed housed and unhoused patrons of a large midwestern U.S. public library system and found that, among homeless patrons ( $n = 213$ ), the most commonly reported information needs were how to find permanent housing (38.5%) and employment (38%), closely followed by financial needs (34.3%) and transportation (32.9%) (Provence et al., 2021).

A qualitative study of five urban LGBTQ+ youth experiencing homelessness identified safety as their primary reason for using the library (Winkelstein, 2019). Interviews with homeless adults have also found that some people experiencing homelessness come to the library because of proximity to shelters and bus routes

(Giesler, 2017) or to meet basic physiological needs, such as using the washroom, resting or sleeping, and avoiding the elements (Dowdell & Liew, 2019; Hodgetts et al., 2008; Kelleher, 2013; Zhang & Chawner, 2018). However, most homeless people reported visiting public libraries for many of the same reasons as their housed counterparts: to access computers for informational and recreational purposes; to read for pleasure or to catch up on news; to socialize; and to attend library programming such as job and life skills programs, book clubs, or movie screenings (Giesler, 2017; Giudice, 2017; Kelleher, 2013; Skinner, 2016; Zhang & Chawner, 2018). Moreover, some library patrons experiencing homelessness indicated that spending time at the library contributed to meeting higher-level needs, such as the sense of belonging and social inclusion (Dowdell & Liew, 2019; Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012; Zhang & Chawner, 2018). Similarly, annual surveys of Dallas Public Library patrons experiencing homelessness reveal that some of their most successful programs for this target group address intellectual needs and personal enrichment, such as creative writing and music lessons, rather than topics such as housing or employment (Giudice, 2017). Giudice (2017) suggests that this may be because “so many homelessness relief partners are overwhelmed with meeting basic needs that the intellectual and community needs of individuals go unmet” (p. 14).

The scholarly, peer-reviewed literature revealed only one Canadian study (Richter et al., 2019) that specifically included the voices of homeless people on how they use the spaces and resources of the public library, but results of this study mirror the above findings of studies in other Western countries. In their research, Richter et al. (2019) used surveys of nearly four thousand library users, both housed and unhoused, of the Edmonton Public Library (EPL), as well as focus groups with homeless adults, to discover how homeless people utilized EPL’s space and resources, and to evaluate how well the library was meeting the needs of these homeless adults. Data indicate that both housed and unhoused patrons use the library in much the same way—“for library-specific programs (attending events, reading, studying, working, researching, using computers) and non-library-specific activities (asking questions, hanging out with friends, using restrooms, and taking a break from the weather)” (Richter et al., 2019, p. 436). Their research also found that EPL’s social outreach program—which refers

patrons to local services related to housing, substance-use support, social services, and legal information—is highly valued by those who use the service (Richter et al., 2019); this finding in the Canadian context aligns with research in other Western countries reporting the importance of partnering with outside organizations to deliver services that support and enhance the success of libraries' entire patron community (Aykanian et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2009; Moxley & Abbas, 2016; Provence, 2018; Wahler et al., 2020).

## **Future Directions**

This literature review has identified a number of gaps in the scholarly literature on homelessness, public libraries, and social inclusion. For instance, most research on the use of public libraries by homeless people has focused on the opinions and perspectives of library staff members; relatively few studies have included the voices of people experiencing homelessness themselves—and even less inquiry has been undertaken into the lived experiences of homeless library users in the Canadian context. Future investigation with homeless adults concentrating on their use of general library services and services targeted specifically toward individuals experiencing homelessness, and how their engagement with these services impacts their perceptions of social inclusion, may offer insights into if and how public libraries' policies, practices, and services support the informational and social needs of their homeless demographic. In turn, these insights may inform the development of public library policies and practices that more effectively meet the needs of library users experiencing homelessness and that help ensure equal and equitable access and promote social inclusion. Further research with homeless individuals who do not use libraries is also necessary to better understanding and removing or reducing barriers to library use.

## **Conclusion**

Homelessness is a prevalent and ongoing social issue in Canada (Echenberg & Munn-Rivard, 2020). For people experiencing homelessness, public libraries are often a neutral, safe public space that can offer a sense of social inclusion (Hodgetts et al., 2008); however, homeless patrons may face barriers, such as library policies or prejudices of staff and other patrons, when accessing library resources (Kelleher, 2013). An important part of the mandate of public libraries is to respond to the changing needs

of library users (ALA, 2006; IFLA, 2017); however, libraries have reported challenges in assisting patrons who present with needs not traditionally addressed in that space (Dowdell & Liew, 2019; Torrey et al., 2009). As such, libraries are increasingly hiring or partnering with social service providers to meet the complex needs of this user group (Aykanian et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2009; Wahler et al., 2020).

Public library initiatives for homeless people that are generalized and inclusive of diverse identities and experiences—reflective of the diversity of the community served—may avoid contributing to further stigmatization of this already-marginalized group (Muggleton, 2013). IFLA's *Guidelines* (2017) suggest that libraries planning to provide services inclusive of people experiencing homelessness conduct a thorough needs analysis which includes the perspectives of this population themselves, to fully understand the range of their needs. Using these insights to inform library policy and practice will help to ensure that resulting recommendations are relevant to the needs of homeless people, facilitate equal access, and contribute positively to social inclusion.

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