Abstract

Purpose – Homelessness has been a growing problem in many countries since the 1980s. The purpose of this paper is to examine homeless peoples’ perspectives on public library services, and to compare these with the attitudes of library staff.

Design/methodology/approach – Eight interviews have been conducted with rough sleepers and formerly homeless library patrons to examine their experiences, needs and expectations or the library. In addition, four library staff have been interviewed about their attitudes to services for members of the homeless community.

Findings – Most rough sleepers and formerly homeless patrons who participated in this research viewed the public library as a safe place because it offered a welcoming atmosphere, access to a variety of resources and services targeted at the homeless. Nonetheless, sleeping has always been a major reason for their use of the library. Most staff members agreed that providing services targeted toward rough sleepers changed the dynamic between staff and the homeless patrons, but there was some disagreement between staff members about whether targeted services were the most appropriate approach.

Practical implications – Understanding homeless and rough sleepers’ expectations for public library services may be useful in revising policy and developing services for this community. In particular, developing partnerships with organisations supporting the homeless is an effective way of developing relevant services for this often-marginalised group.

Originality/value – Little research has considered public library services from the perspective of homeless people. This research is intended to fill that gap.

Keywords Public libraries, New Zealand, Homeless, Case studies, Library staff, Rough sleepers

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

People living in large cities have become accustomed to seeing rough sleepers and people who are homeless in the central business district (CBD). Library services to people who are homeless have been a recurring theme in professional literature since the 1980s. This is generally based on the belief that public library services should be available to all members of the library’s community, regardless of their “race, nationality, age, gender, religion,
language, disability, economic and employment status and educational attainment” (IFLA, 2001, p. 1).

One of the first papers written on the topic of services to people who are homeless was by Simmons (1985), who noted that library customers who are homeless are traditionally viewed as problem patrons, rather than as people who deserve access to services from their public library. Simmons (1985, p. 117) suggested that to move discussions forward, “[a]n attempt should be made to understand the issue from the homeless patron’s point of view, to understand the nature of the homeless and their needs”.

Although many studies have focused on initiatives that provide public library services to homeless people in different parts of the world, little research has been done that presents homeless people’s point of view. This research is intended to fill that gap by reporting on a case study of rough sleeping and formerly homeless people’s perspectives on public libraries’ services, based on interviews with homeless patrons who use the Auckland Central City Library. The goal was to identify rough sleepers’ opinions and needs from a customer perspective to help library staff understand the reality of rough sleeping, and what services the library can offer to people who are homeless. Gathering staff members’ voices was also a key component of the research, to gain an additional perspective on the issues associated with providing services to this marginalised group.

The following definitions were used in this research:

- **Homeless**: “having nowhere to live” Homelessness in New Zealand is “officially defined as having no options to acquire safe and secure housing” (Bellamy, 2014).
- **Rough sleepers**: “a homeless person who sleeps rough”. Auckland City Mission (2016a) noted that the most visible homeless people in New Zealand are rough sleepers. In 2016, the number of Central Auckland rough sleepers was over 200 for the first time since the count started in 2004 (Auckland City Mission, 2016b).
- **Public library**: “an organization established, supported and funded by the community, either through local, regional or national government [...]. It provides access to knowledge, information and works of the imagination through a range of resources and services and is equally available to all members of the community” (IFLA, 2001, p. 1).

**Literature review**

Since Simmons (1985) first raised the issue of providing library services to people who are homeless, this topic has regularly featured in professional publications. The following section reviews this literature under three broad themes: the homeless and their needs, library policy affecting the homeless and public library services to the homeless.

**The homeless and their needs**

Homelessness has been recognized as a social problem around the world since the early 1980s (Kelleher, 2013). People become homeless for a range of reasons, such as financial hardship, job loss, eviction, family break up and escaping domestic violence (ALIA, 2016). Homeless people may rely on shelters for their accommodation, or they may live on the streets or in cars. This type of precarious living is challenging, meaning that homeless people must overcome a range of obstacles to survive. Although finding food and shelter/accommodation are typically their major concerns, Muggleton and Ruthven’s (2012) interviewed 18 homeless individuals in Glasgow and identified social isolation and a lack of privacy in hostels as other common problems.
Additional insight into the experience of homelessness comes from a project conducted by Auckland Council (2015b). In-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 13 people who were sleeping rough in central Auckland. Three people with family members who were rough sleepers and nine former rough sleepers were also interviewed. The findings provided insight into the coping mechanisms used by rough sleepers, which included begging, sharing food with other people living on the street and stealing, and the support mechanisms they used, which included developing relationships with people living in similar circumstances. Many of the words interviewees used to describe their experiences had a negative connotation, such as “outcast”, “under-privileged”, “lonely”, “boring”, “hungry”, “depressing” and “invisible”, though some also described it as “a privilege”, “fun” and “interesting”. Most were concerned about their personal safety, and had developed a range of strategies to keep themselves safe, including following a standard daily routine.

Few of these studies into the experience of the homeless focused on access to information and libraries. However, public libraries located in central cities are often used by homeless people as “safe” havens when they are open, sometimes to sleep, but also to use the library computers to stay in touch with family and friends (Hersberger, 2002/2003). As one of the challenges faced by homeless people is their ability to maintain their personal hygiene, it is not surprising that the homeless are often regarded as “problem patrons”, rather than as library customers (Shuman, 1996). The next section discusses how library policies have been used to address this issue.

**Library policy affecting the homeless**

Simmons (1985) noted that while some homeless people may be harmless, many library staff consider them to be a nuisance (p. 110). Other homeless people may present real or potential threats to library staff or other library users because of the way they interact with others. Because of this, many libraries have developed specific policies to address issues associated with homeless people who are present in the library. Examining the literature about public library policies shows that there has been a range of approaches. Some libraries have implemented a blanket ban on homeless people using the library. Pidd (2015) interviewed a spokesman for Manchester City Council to find out why homeless people involved in an anti-austerity protest were banned from entering library. The reason given for the ban was that there had been skirmishes when the group tried to enter the building to occupy the library, which had distressed both library staff and members of the public, and the city’s library bylaw allowed such bans to be enacted as necessary.

This type of ban has become unusual, largely because people now acknowledge that people who are homeless have legitimate information needs that may be filled by resources available at a public library (Bardoff, 2015). Hersberger (1999) noted that classifying all homeless people as “problem patrons” was discriminatory, since many use the library to find information. The American Library Association (2010) policy on library services for the poor identified 14 policy objectives for providing library services to people with low or no incomes. Because of this change in attitude, it is now more common for library policies and codes of conduct to focus on acceptable behaviour, including listing undesirable behaviours or characteristics, which may result in people being denied access to the library. For these policies to be effective, Malmquist (1996) recommended that the policies should be expressed in writing, specify unacceptable behaviour or characteristics clearly, limited to behaviour in the library, and include an appeal process (p. 98). In addition, Bullard (2002) recommended that the policy or code of conduct should be visible in the library and on the library website, and that staff should be trained in dealing with breaches that occur. The need for training in
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dealing with breaches of the policy is reiterated in Pressley’s (2017) survey of public librarians’ perceptions of the impact of users with serious mental illnesses. She found that 96 per cent of respondents believed that some users who were homeless also experienced serious mental illness, and a high proportion of these respondents wished for training to help them have better interactions with these users.

Public library services to the homeless

A growing number of articles in the professional literature discuss innovative services that libraries are providing for homeless people. Hersberger (2005, p. 199) noted, “the homeless are not a homogeneous population.” Subgroups include single men, military veterans, single women, couples, runaway teenagers and families (Hersberger, 1999, p. 8).

Ayers (2006) outlined a range of services that libraries could provide for homeless members of their communities, including providing collections that could be taken into the streets or to shelters, in addition to providing access to computers. Kelleher (2013) examined how homeless people in the USA used libraries based on surveys conducted with over 100 homeless individuals in central Michigan in 2009. The findings showed that most participants valued the libraries’ services, few reported using the library to sleep, and internet access was particularly important. This finding is reinforced by Gui et al.’s study of 14 Los Angeles “drifters”, which found that many used library computers to stay mentally active and reduce instances of mental illness. Willett and Broadley (2011) and Mars (2012) noted that some libraries allow homeless people to use shelter addresses to register for a library card. Estrella (2016) also found that some public libraries in her study had adapted their registration processes to allow homeless people to borrow material from the library, though in some cases their borrowing privileges were limited.

Giudice (2017) described the steps Dallas Public Library followed to engage with members of the local homeless community. They began making eye contact and greeting people as they entered the library, trained staff in safe ways of engaging with people who appeared to be experience mental illness and began a “Coffee & Conversation” programme to encourage homeless people and other library users’ chat with library staff. Another change was the tone of library signs. Rather than presenting a list of “forbidden’ behaviours”, the signs reminded all visitors of the importance of respecting the shared space of the library. Library staff conducted an annual survey to identify suitable topics for library programmes, and found that educational programmes, such as creative writing, can be more successful than ones that focus on solving the challenges of homelessness. Estrella (2016) examined the services for homeless people offered by four public libraries in the UK. She found that none provided library-based programmes intended solely for people who are homeless or economically disadvantaged. However, most provided information about services available from other government agencies and charitable organisations at their libraries, often in the form of brochures or handouts. Several of the libraries undertook outreach activities in which selected services were delivered at housing estates.

Mi et al. (2014) focused on the challenges faced by homeless people in accessing health information. Their participatory research project found that many people living at the shelter had unmet needs for health information. Because of this, the authors recommended that shelter staff refer clients with health information needs to the local public library, and that staff from the local medical library facilitate outreach programmes to provide additional assistance.

Hersberger (1999, 2002/2003, 2005) discussed the everyday information needs of homeless parents in a series of three papers. She found that their main information need involved access to resources about social services, and that only a few interviewees used
public libraries’ computers regularly. Barriers to library use included a lack of skills to use the internet and a lack of transportation to get to the library. However, access to computers was important because many homeless people relied on using library computers to send and receive email that allows them to keep in touch with their families (Ayers 2006). To overcome the skills barriers, Collins et al. (2009) recommended tailoring library programmes to homeless people’s needs, such as focusing computer skills classes on how to find job training or employment websites. They also suggested providing food or childcare during programmes to encourage homeless parents to attend. MacGillivray et al. (2010) found that mothers living in homeless shelters with their children valued having access to a range of children’s material at the local library, and that borrowing books improved children’s literacy.

In a study of the Murcia Regional Library in Spain, Gómez-Hernández et al. (2017) focused on how people living in a homeless people’s hostel used the library, and whether this led to increased social and digital inclusion. Their main finding was that being able to access the library provided vulnerable groups with opportunities to socialize as well as to use the internet for a range of purposes. In addition, library services such as training workshops helped members of the group gain enhanced skills.

Hill (2013, 2016) identified innovative ways that public libraries offer services to homeless teens, such as visiting homeless shelters to provide library programmes on site, giving donated books to families living at the shelter and issuing “special” invitations to participate in library-based programmes. This simple action ensured that the teens knew they are welcome to enter the library.

Collins et al. (2009) noted the importance of forming alliances with other groups who provide assistance to homeless people, such as social service agencies and social workers. Forming these types of alliances allows library programmes to be run at more convenient locations, a partial solution to the transport issues that Hersberger (2002/2003) identified. Wong (2009) gave an example of this at San Francisco Public Library, which offered story times and movie showings at shelters for homeless children. Comito (2015) gave two examples of partnerships, which help libraries provide relevant services to homeless people. Working with social workers and raising funds from library’s in-house café and local shops, Denver Public Library offered a “pop-up” concert and refreshments to the city’s homeless in September 2015. Lava Mae, a not-for-profit organisation located in San Francisco, has worked with The San Francisco Library since September 2015 to provide showers on its bus, which parks outside the library. At the same time, library’s health and safety associates provide outreach services to the homeless who are waiting to use the showers. Chant (2017) described another initiative at Denver Public Library, which has hired three “peer navigators” to assist vulnerable people, including those who are homeless, with their interactions with social services. Peer navigators are people who have experience in dealing with these services themselves, which means they can provide advice based on first-hand knowledge of which approaches are likely to be most effective. This approach is also used in the San Francisco Public Library, which has created positions for health and safety advocates to promote services to the poor. People in these roles were formerly homeless themselves, giving them insight into what types of services and programmes will be most useful. Koepfler et al. (2014) described the “Baltimarket” food delivery service, which allows people to order food online and have it delivered to their local library branch. They also noted that libraries in San Francisco and Tucson have social workers and public health nurses available to provide assistance with recovering from drug addiction and basic health care. However, in a UK context, Miller (2011) found that although homeless charities were
open to the idea of working with libraries to improve services to the homeless, the pressure of their day-to-day work meant that this was not a priority.

Initiatives that connect a range of agencies that provide services to the homeless are another example of effective service innovation. Torres (2015) described a fair that brought over 30 service providers to the homeless together for a one-day event. Over 400 homeless or at-risk people attended, taking advantage of the convenience of having everything under a single roof.

Not all writers fully endorse the provision of special services for homeless people. Muggleton (2013) cautioned against special treatment for homeless people, noting that these can reinforce false perceptions about what services are most valuable for this group, and placed too much emphasis on their “otherness”. He recommended that services for the homeless should be related to the library’s overall goals, so that they become part of the library’s ordinary routines and activities, perceived as an everyday service, rather than a “special” one.

**Research context**

*Homelessness and libraries*

In April 2017, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) published Draft IFLA (2017) Guidelines for Library Services to People Experiencing Homelessness on its website. This notes that homelessness is a complex international issue, which requires a better understanding and concrete steps to be taken regarding serving the homeless people. Many people are prejudiced towards this group, based on an assumption that homelessness is the result of personal choice, laziness, or drug addiction. These prejudices need to be overcome to improve library services for homeless patrons. Thus, gaining insight into homelessness is necessary 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.

*Homelessness in New Zealand*

At least one in 100 New Zealanders were homeless according to recent research (Amore, 2016; Bazley, 2016; Davison, 2016; Price, 2016; Radio New Zealand, 2016). Although homelessness is particularly noticeable in the largest cities such as Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington, the issue is a national problem (Amore, 2016; Bellamy, 2014; Furley, 2016). Solving homelessness will require different levels of government and other organisations to work together to identify good solutions, design new initiatives, and implement services. Libraries are likely to be one component of these services.

*Auckland libraries and homeless patrons*

Auckland Libraries is the largest public library system in Australasia (Auckland Council, 2015a). *Te Kauroa—Future Directions 2013-2023*, a 10-year strategic plan for Auckland Libraries, indicates that the library’s programmes and services goal is to become a “place of imagination, learning and connection” (p. 13) for its community members, regardless of their background (Auckland Libraries, 2013). *Te Kauroa* also states that customers are put at the centre in terms of the library’s approach to development (p. 41).

Auckland Libraries was the first library in New Zealand to deliver targeted services for the rough sleeping community, starting in 2015 (Bradley, 2016). In partnership with the Auckland City Mission, Auckland Central City Library developed targeted programming for homeless and formerly homeless members of its community (Carnegie, 2015). This involved setting up a series of *hui* (the Māori word for meeting) with members of the rough
sleeping community, and subsequently initiating programming suggested by them. In 2017, Auckland Libraries offered three services for rough sleepers: Monday Movie Club, Wednesday Mission Book Club and Friday Reading Revolution (Bradley, 2016; Parker, 2016). These sessions are also open to other patrons. These targeted services have been offered for approximately two years, and have attracted a group of regular users. However, staff have observed that incidents of prejudice towards members of the rough sleeping community still occur. The literature review showed that while there are a growing number of articles giving examples of library services targeted towards homeless people, the voice of the homeless is often absent from the discussions. The goal of this paper is to address that gap.

Study objectives
This study was designed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What are rough sleepers’ experiences of using public libraries in Auckland?

RQ2. Why do rough sleepers use public libraries in Auckland?

RQ3. What are rough sleepers’ expectations of public libraries in Auckland?

RQ4. What are Auckland Central City Library’s staff perspectives on serving the homeless?

Research design
This project used a qualitative case study methodology (Leedy and Ormrod, 2015; Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). This was selected as the most appropriate approach because it provided depth of investigation, flexibility, uniqueness and narrative reporting (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013) that were a good fit to the research questions. The major limitation of a single case study is that only one library is involved, so the findings may not be generalizable to other situations (Leedy and Ormrod, 2015).

Data were collected using one-on-one interviews, observations, documents and past program records. One-on-one interviews were chosen because they allowed the researcher to gain in-depth insight into interviewees’ perspectives, while also being relatively informal and friendly. An interview guide, included as Appendix, was used to ensure that all interviews covered similar topics, but the flow of the discussion determined which follow-up questions were asked. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the first author.

The main population for this study was adult rough sleepers and/or formerly homeless patrons who use Auckland Central City Library. Eight people were recruited to participate in the in-depth interviews. Four staff members who work with homeless people were also interviewed. Victoria University of Wellington School of Information Management Human Ethics Committee gave ethical approval for the study. In addition, Auckland Libraries’ Head of Digital Solutions and Innovation/Pouarāhī, Hua Matihiko me ngā Auahatanga, gave permission for the library to be used as the site of this research.

Four staff interviews were carried out first. Following that, prospective interviewees who were known to be homeless or formerly homeless were approached in the library and invited to be interviewed for this research. Five agreed, and in addition, three formerly homeless patrons were also invited to be interviewed, based on snowball sampling with library staff. All interviewees were given an information sheet about the research, and asked to sign a consent form agreeing to have their interview recorded.
At the time of the interviews, the three interviewees who were rough sleepers were residing in the Auckland CBD. The five formerly homeless patrons currently had housing, but all had previously experienced long periods of homelessness. Seven were men and one was woman. One participant was in his early 20s, whereas the others were between 30 and 50 years old.

Observation occurred during the primary researcher’s involvement in the Monday Movies sessions at Auckland Central City Library. This focused on participants’ engagement and interaction with each other. Attendance records for the sessions were also used to determine the number of people attending.

Data analysis
Once the interviews were transcribed, themes emerging from the responses were categorised using a grounded theoretical approach (Leedy and Ormrod, 2015). After each interview, the researcher noted key points about the data using the constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser and Strauss, cited in Leedy and Ormrod, 2015).

Findings
This section presents the overall findings, arranged by the main themes that emerged from the interviews. Staff perspectives have been incorporated with those from the homeless/formerly homeless interviewees to present an integrated perspective.

Library experiences
Seven interviewees were members of the library, and one was not. This person still visited the library every day. Two had been members of other public libraries before moving to Auckland. Some interviewees came to the library to use computers to search for jobs and housing information, whereas others came to read books in the library, or to borrow books to read elsewhere. Several interviewees commented that the resources available in the library helped them stay up to date with news and other developments. One said that being able to use the library was important because it “keep[s] you connected, you know”.

The homeless people who were library members were able to join because Auckland Libraries changed their conditions for membership to remove barriers for the homeless. Previously people wishing to join the library were required to show ID and proof of address, but at the time the research was conducted, a community services card and a letter from Auckland City Mission were acceptable (as indicated in Figure 1). The library also allowed homeless patrons to store books they borrowed at the issue desk between visits if they did not have access to secure storage elsewhere.

Interviewees placed considerable value on being a library member. One formerly homeless patron said, “I enjoyed being a library member because you got the library card!” This suggests that people who often have few possessions see a symbolic value in having a card indicating that they are a legitimate user of the library.

Preferred library
When asked which library they visit most often, all interviewees named the Auckland Central City Library. One also visits two community libraries, which are closer to where he lives. Interviewees identified a range of reasons for visiting the library, with the resources and the facilities at Central Library being the main things attracting them to visit frequently.
In addition, the location means that the library is convenient, and they can meet friends and other people there.

One formerly homeless patron also mentioned the staff in answering this question:

Staff. You know you get to know the staff. And, uh, pretty much the fact that [they are] very welcoming.

Two interviewees who were currently sleeping rough in the Auckland CBD area said they just come to Auckland Central City Library every day, with one saying “Because it is the closest library, and it is very useful”.

One staff member pointed out that Auckland Central City Library plays a unique role in the CBD area because of its welcoming atmosphere. This makes the library a comfortable place for anyone from the community. Although the library and the City Mission provide free coffee and snacks prior to the weekly events, no one comes just for food. Staff identified another reason for regular attendance as the routines (attending the clubs in the library on the same day each week) were important to help rough sleepers feel they have a life, and that they have things to do. This was echoed in comments from the rough sleeping/homeless interviewees. One formerly homeless patron explained his motivation as “My motivation is just to get up every day, just do something. I don’t want to be lazy.” A rough sleeper said he wants the homeless people off New Zealand’s streets, so he comes to the library and joins the clubs to show people his positive life attitude.
Use of the library

The three rough sleepers identified sleeping as one of the reasons they went to the library. When asked how he used the public library in the past, one rough sleeper said, “sleep”. He was not interested in reading. However, he did use the computers in the library to look for jobs and housing information, but being able to sleep in the library was still the most important to him. He also pointed out that sometimes he had been told off for sleeping by the security guard, but also commented, “This is non-fair treatment.” Another rough sleeper said that sometimes they just need a 10- or 15-min-long nap to refresh their mind, which they think should be supported by the library.

A formerly homeless patron’s response may explain why they choose to sleep in the library:

You know when I was homeless, I had nowhere to go. I came here [the Central Library], read a book, keep warm, out of the wind.

Perceptions of the library

All interviewees agreed that the public library is a safe place for homeless people, in comparison with other places that are available to them. One formerly homeless patron said that he did not encounter problems in the library. “Good staff members” were highlighted by another formerly homeless patron as important for keeping the environment safe. In his opinion, the librarians at Auckland Central City Library were sensitive to people from other cultures, which made him feel safe and comfortable. Another formerly homeless patron found the library was a comfortable environment saying, “You can just talk to people, meet people.”

A rough sleeper indicated that he liked the environment in the library. He felt loved and respected, especially when he came to the Monday Movie Club. Another rough sleeper highlighted the variety in the library. He said that every time he comes to the library, he has a different experience because of the range of resources and services.

Reasons for using services at the library

Personal involvement in the initial planning

One formerly homeless patron who had been part of the initial planning for Auckland Central City Library’s services to the homeless said that many ideas came from the hui they had with the library three years earlier. Monday Movie Club and the City Mission Book Club were an outcome from the partnership between the homeless community and the library. When talking about the homeless community’s involvement in the initial planning, he pointed out:

People put a lot of energy to do this. They come here with wide attitude. They come here to be involved, have voice that they don’t have anywhere else. And that’s really important for them.

In contrast, two formerly homeless interviewees did not feel that being part of initial planning for new services was important. One of them was happy to go along with any ideas he found interesting/appealing. The other said getting involved was not a thing for him. The rest of the interviewees were willing to give input if asked, and two rough sleepers wanted to be involved in planning new services as they have ideas to contribute.

Participation in library programmes (Monday Movie Club and/or City Mission Book Club)

Three of the four staff members who were interviewed have been involved in providing services for the rough sleeping community. This involvement gave them good knowledge of
the programmes as well as background information about the context of the programmes. All interviewees felt it was important to acknowledge that although Monday Movie Club and the City Mission Book Club services were developed as targeted programmes for the rough sleeping community, the events are open to anyone.

All staff members interviewed mentioned the importance of the partnership with Auckland City Mission during the initial planning for these services, as well as the involvement of members of the rough sleeping community. One staff member used the phrase *lounge hui* because people who live on the streets treat Auckland Central City Library as a lounge. The Book Club was initially set up by the Auckland City Mission but is now hosted by library staff with the Mission providing snacks.

Library staff interviewees noted a difference in participants between the two sessions. Most Monday Movie Club participants are male rough sleepers or formerly homeless patrons in their late 30s, 40s and 50s. On average, 20-30 people attend every week. One staff member observed that women and teenagers join in occasionally. Everyone who comes has some knowledge of movies. In comparison, the City Mission Book Club is a smaller group of readers and book lovers, but there is still variety. Some people who attend are rough sleepers and some are not. Some bring new people with them. However, staff interviewees also noticed that some people just come once and do not come back.

All interviewees said they are keen to interact with other people when they attend the Monday Movie Club or the City Mission Book Club. One formerly homeless patron said he likes listening when club members talk about authors and books. Their knowledge is extensive: “I find it is really amazing. People don’t understand what homeless know.” Other interviewees mentioned they like to talk to people and meet friends when they join in. This kind of social communication is important to them.

Staff also commented on interactions, not only between participants but also between staff and the participants. They had observed that participants are keen to interact with each other and some are friends outside the library. For those who did not know each other before, friendships have developed since they have begun participating in the events. Interactions between participants and staff members who host the clubs also occur often.

A key result of these interactions is increased trust within the community. This also strengthens the relationship between members of the rough sleeping community and library staff. In turn, this assists with conflict management, and also resolves misconceptions about homeless patrons. “I think a few years ago a lot of the staff would talk about homeless people in quite a derogatory way, and I think that doesn’t happen much anymore,” said one staff member. Monday Movie Club and the City Mission Book Club are both hosted by library staff. One of the rough sleepers mentioned the librarians he meets each time he joins Monday Movie Club sessions as the main reason he comes. He valued this communication with the staff, which makes him feel like he is being treated fairly.

Free coffee and snacks are provided before the movie and book club. While this was not identified as the main reason most interviewees attended, one rough sleeper mentioned it was a bonus for him to join in.

One formerly homeless patron highlighted the educational aspect of Monday Movie Club. He said there are not many facilities where homeless people can watch movies. Having free access to the screening allows them to learn.

*Emotional effects*

The previous section on the homeless and their needs showed that many of them use negative words to express how they feel about being homeless. Because of this, interviewees were asked how they felt when they attended library programmes for the homeless. Half of
the interviewees did not respond to this question. One formerly homeless patron’s answer may explain why – “I guess there is not much feeling. It’s all based on trust.”

Two rough sleepers responded more positively. They said that when they come and join the Monday Movie Club they feel good. Coming to the library feels very comfortable and they appreciate that. One of them emphasized that he feels a sense of belonging and respect. He feels that he is part of the team and part of the community.

Library services to the homeless community
All the library staff who were interviewed agree that members of the homeless community have diverse needs. “They are such a mixed background of people. You can’t just put a label ‘homeless’ on them,” said one staff member. When they come to the Book Club, some homeless people show that they have considerable knowledge. They can recall facts and figures about a range of topics, which is not what people may expect from a homeless person.

Although their information needs cannot be all met in the library, there are other ways to offer help. One staff member pointed out that many homeless patrons are looking for housing and job information. They want to know their rights, and the benefits they can get. The library does not offer consultation services, but librarians often help rough sleepers in accessing computers, and find information online. Another staff member also mentioned that having the Citizens’ Advice Bureau in the library is a good combination service at Auckland Central City Library. Thus, this reflects the importance of “Partnership” identified previously. Library staff may not be able to help with all of the homeless community needs, but they can help connect people with other organisations’ services.

Interviewees were asked what services they expected the library to provide. Their answers showed that they had differing views on this.

- **Smile**: When asked their expectations from the library, one rough sleeper said “Smile!”. He comes to the Auckland Central City Library every day. For him this is the only thing he wants to see when he walks into the library.

- **“Somebody is doing a good job”**: Talking about expectations, one formerly homeless patron admitted he does have expectations from the library. He thinks Auckland Libraries is doing a good job, especially the staff. His information needs have always been met with librarians’ help. This impressed him.

- **“I don’t expect too much”**: One formerly homeless patron’s response may represent other participants. He said he does not expect too much from the library. For him, the library is a place to relax. He can use the space and borrow books.

Interviewees were also asked whether they had any suggestions for ways the library could improve its services to homeless people. The overall impression from their responses is that they want “more”:

- **More flyers and posters**: One rough sleeper wanted to have other organisations’ flyers and posters in the library, which could give additional information about support options for the rough sleeping community.

- **More events**: “So much going on in the library”, said a formerly homeless patron. He wanted more events to be held that would appeal to the wider community.

- **Longer opening**: Two interviewees suggested that extending libraries’ opening hours would have a significant impact on Auckland Central, not just for the homeless community but for everyone. “Overseas libraries can open until midnight.
It might be a bit ambitious for New Zealand, but I would definitely like at least a couple of more hours during the week,” said one formerly homeless patron.

- **Another security guard**: Incidents of offensive and/or threatening behaviour happen from time to time in the library. One formerly homeless patron said if Auckland Central City Library could have one more security guard that would help.

- **More welcoming and inclusive**: “I know a lot of homeless don’t cause trouble,” said one formerly homeless patron. So he suggested that the library’s facilities need to be more welcoming and inclusive for everyone.

- **Extending the library’s role**: One formerly homeless patron claimed that now the community is looking at Auckland Central City Library as a facility for general purposes: “It is not just a library, because you are accommodating the whole community.” This was also a topic mentioned by one staff member, who said that based on feedback from the rough sleeping community, the things they want most are showers and lockers. Movies and the book club are activities they enjoy, but they also want somewhere to live. “I would like to see in the future, everyone has a home because that’s all central and local governments should work towards,” said this interviewee.

Staff responses to this question generally focused on services to enhance homeless people’s skills. One staff member said she would like to organise literacy programmes for homeless patrons: “I’m sure we could provide space for it, and support for it. We’re not the teachers, but we could facilitate.” She felt that being able to read would make a significant difference to their lives – for example, gaining basic competencies, such as reading signs or completing forms.

Finally, two staff members both mentioned the importance of partnership as a key element when dealing with people who are homeless. Rough sleepers often have decisions made for them, but homeless patrons can have a voice in shaping new services and programmes. These staff felt that the library does not have to control everything.

**Library and librarians’ roles**

The four staff members who were interviewed were asked how serving homeless people affected their jobs and their relationships with colleagues. Their responses suggested that they have a range of perspectives on this, rather than a unified view.

- **Disagreements between staff members**: Treating homeless patrons as normal customers can be challenging for the staff, although these patrons do not even always need (or want) special treatment. One staff member who is involved in providing services for the rough sleepers was once asked, “Could you go, and deal with one of your homeless people?” While this suggests that some staff are not comfortable dealing with members of this community, other staff members often go out of their way to help homeless patrons.

- **Training and experience**: One staff member pointed out that treating homeless patrons as “problem patrons” are deep-rooted in librarian culture. Staff who were working at Auckland Central City Library when the movie and book club were launched were provided with training on working with rough sleepers. One staff member who had that training said, “it was really educational in the sense that it made you stop and think about your priorities, and your preconceived ideas.” In contrast, less experienced staff were more likely to find dealing with homeless patrons challenging. Thefts at Auckland Central City Library have put homeless
patrons in a bad light, which can lead to misconceptions, simplifications, or assumptions about homeless patrons. One staff member pointed out that some staff assume anyone who behaves badly is homeless. “I don’t think we need to think of the homeless as an exception. Staff don’t know who is homeless, and we don’t need to know,” said one staff member.

- **Changing attitudes:** One staff member noted that staff attitudes towards homeless people have changed in the last ten years, although not all staff are comfortable having homeless people using the library. The targeted programmes at Auckland Central City Library for the rough sleeping community have given staff members opportunities to interact with community members. However, the observations of interactions in the library showed that ad-hoc interaction between staff and homeless patrons is still not common.

- **From challenge to opportunity:** Auckland Central City Library has recognised the challenges of working with this community, and made it an opportunity for relationship building. This has involved the co-design of services for the community with the community. All the staff members interviewed said serving homeless patrons is just like serving any other customers. “It’s all perception. The library is a place for everyone. Don’t make assumptions,” one said.

### Rough sleeping community and library policy

When asked about developing policy for library services to homeless people at a national and local level, interviewees had different opinions. Two staff members agreed that relevant policy is a good thing to have and to refer to. In contrast, another interviewee did not think that specific policy addressing homeless people’s needs was needed, because the library should treat every patron the same regardless of their backgrounds.

### Discussion

The goal of this study was not to determine whether homeless patrons are “problem patrons”. Its primary aim was to explore the real needs of the rough sleepers who come to the library, and also to let staff members reflect on the services they provide for the homeless community.

This study has shown that a respectful dialogue with members of the rough sleeping community is possible, which is something many want. When recruiting participants for this research project’s interviews, one rough sleeper was surprised to hear that a library staff member was doing this type of research. He kept asking whether this is an ongoing project because he wants to be heard. One staff member commented that this community is used to having decisions made for them. This may explain why many of the rough sleepers and formerly homeless patrons were keen to talk.

Partnership is important when developing services for people who are homeless. Previous research (such as Comito, 2015, Collins et al., 2009 and Estrella, 2016) had shown that this facilitates making connections with this under-served group. Partnership with the Auckland City Mission was a key component of the planning process in developing Auckland Central City Library’s services to the homeless. The four staff member interviewees all commented on the effectiveness of the partnership, complemented by the rough sleeping community’s involvement in the initial planning phase. The community identified many ideas for possible services, two of which were implemented at Auckland Central City Library. Two years later, these services are still being offered, and new
programmes are being considered. This approach turned the challenges posed by the homeless community into opportunities for building relationships with the community.

However, the interviews with members of the homeless community showed that only some interviewees were interested in contributing ideas for new programmes. Others were more passive and did not share this interest. This finding emphasises the importance of letting individuals determine how they want to be involved in new developments.

Furthermore, the findings point to interviewees from the rough sleeping community’s reluctance to be labelled “homeless patrons”. All the rough sleepers and formerly homeless patrons who were interviewed said that their main desire is for fair treatment. They do not expect special services from the library, although they do have different information needs when compared to other patrons. The interviews also showed that interviewees still experience prejudice and assumptions about homeless patrons’ behaviour. The staff member interviews confirmed that prejudice still exists, but they felt that this is less common as people gain more experience working with the homeless community.

Everyone interviewed for this research accepted that a public library should be available to all members of its community, no matter what their background was. No one questioned whether providing services targeted to people who are homeless or sleeping rough reduced services to other groups, though all staff emphasized that these services are open to anyone.

Staff comments acknowledge that the public library’s role in the community is evolving. This attitude is now reflected in the library’s policies, which were changed to make it possible for people who are homeless to join the library, and to borrow books and other material. A formerly homeless patron suggested that the rough sleeping community sees Auckland Central City Library as their lounge. The building is not just a library to them, but it is also a space for other purposes. This may represent the views of many people from the rough sleeping community, and acknowledges the role of the library as a “community space” as well as a source of information.

The stories staff shared in the interviews are reflective of recommendations in Willett and Broadley’s (2011, p. 668) research – particularly the importance of staff training “in awareness and skills (through partners) in order to ensure staff have a knowledge of relevant issues”. Staff members who had training in working with the rough sleeping community found it educational. The content made them think about their own and others’ prejudices and preconceived ideas. All the rough sleepers and formerly homeless interviewees acknowledged library staff as one of the reasons they came to Auckland Central City Library, which means that it is important for staff to feel comfortable in interacting with this group.

Conclusion

In contrast with earlier views that homeless people are problem patrons whose behaviour needs to be modified, this study has shown that members of Auckland’s homeless/rough sleeping community feel that the library plays an important role in their lives. While some of them see the physical building as the most important, providing them with a safe place to sleep, others value it as a source of information and education and a place for social interaction, which echoes the findings of Gómez-Hernández et al. (2017). A key finding is that giving members of the rough sleeping community a voice to identify what they need from public library can result in innovative services, such as movie nights, that complement other library services.

The findings also reveal a number of issues that have emerged from the conversations with the staff members.
Rough sleepers who use the library find it to be a safe place, where they expect to receive fair treatment. They do not want to be labelled as “homeless patrons” because they have information needs like other people in the community. They appreciate having opportunities to be consulted about library services they might use.

The staff members’ reflections also show that having staff involved and providing relevant training gives them improved knowledge of how to interact with the homeless community. This develops a better understanding between the two groups. One staff member pointed out that librarians do not need to know who is a homeless patron. Whether they like or not, they should treat everyone coming to the library in the same way.

The feedback from the rough sleepers, formerly homeless patrons, and staff members about possible future services also raises a question about the public library’s role in the community. Is a public library just a source of books and information, or does it need to broaden its role? What more can the public library offer to the homeless community? Responses to these questions may require policy changes or development at both national and local levels.

References


collins et al.


Hill, R. (2013), “When the library is the only place that you have to go: Homeless teens and libraries”, VOYA, Vol. 34 No. 6, pp. 538-539.


Further reading


Appendix. Interview guides

Questions for rough sleepers/formerly homeless patrons
It is acknowledged that there are no right or wrong answers. Answers are purely your experiences and opinions.

A. General questions about using public libraries
Q1: Are you a regular patron at Auckland Libraries? When did you become a library member? What do you like being an AL member?
Q2: Which library do you visit most of the time? Can you explain why?
Q3A: How did you use libraries in the past? (e.g. borrowing books)
Q3B: How do you use libraries NOW (e.g. using public computers and joining in Clubs)?
Q3C: What are your general experiences at libraries? Do you see libraries as a safe place for you to stay? Comparing Q1B and Q1C, are there any changes in the way you use libraries?

B. Questions about using services at Auckland Central city library
Q4: Have you heard of Book Club and Monday Movies for homeless at Auckland Central City Library?
Q5: Were you involved in planning these two services? If yes, to what extent? If not, do you think you should be part of the initial planning? Why?
Q6A: Do you attend any of these two clubs? If yes, what is your motivation of joining in? Are you keen to interact with each other or make friends? And what is your feeling when you participant in the club?
Q6B: If not, why?
Q7: Are these two services you are expecting from libraries?
Q8: What other services at Auckland Central City Library do you use?
Q9: When do you need help, do you go to the staff?

C. Questions about personal expectations from public libraries and librarians
Q10: What do you expect when you come to the libraries?
Q11: What suggestions would you make to improve AL’s services?

D. Any other comments?

Questions for staff who run or organize programmes/events for homeless patrons
It is acknowledged that there are no right or wrong answers. Answers are purely your observations and opinions.

A. General questions about programmes/events for homeless patrons
Q1: Tell me about the programmes/events for rough sleepers/homeless patrons you are involved in.
Q2A: Do the programmes/events you are involved in deliberately target rough sleepers or general homeless patrons? Why do you think this is?
Q2B: If yes – why and how? Has it always been this way since it started? Why/why not? What has changed?
Q3: Do your programmes/events attract a variety of homeless patrons? If yes, why do you think this is? If no, are there other ways to meet their needs in the library?
B. Questions about interactions and participation
Q4: Were homeless patrons involved in planning these services initially? If yes, how? If no, what is the reason?
Q5: Are those homeless patrons attending your programmes/event keen to interact with each other?
Q5A: If yes, to what extent? If no, what is the reason do you think this is?
Q6: Do staff interact with homeless patrons attending the programmes/event? Can you tell me a bit more about what you have observed?
Q7: Have you noticed whether there are “regulars” at your programmes/events? Why do you think this is?
Q8: Are there particular reasons they come and participate? Can you tell me a bit more about what you have observed? (For example, are they catching up before they come and participate in the programmes/events? Or are they coming for food, and the leisure time during the programmes/events?)

C. Questions about personal interests/needs.
Q9: Points about homeless patrons’ needs:
“The homeless are not a homogeneous population. Thus, they have different information needs depending on their individual’s backgrounds. Not all of their information needs can be met by public librarians.”
Refer to Q9 points: Do you believe these are true based on your experiences organizing/planning programmes/events? Can you tell me more about it? (For example: Have homeless patrons expressed their needs or expectations from libraries to you? Are there any challenges for you as a librarian to meet all their information needs? Why?)

D. Questions about libraries and librarians’ roles in homeless patrons’ lives
Q10: Points about libraries and librarians’ attitudes:
“Library’s attitudes of “worthy” versus “unworthy” users; Librarians’ attitude is the primary issue in the context of providing services to the homeless; Treating the homeless as “problem patron” is discrimination.”
Refer to Q10 points: Do you agree with those points regarding serving the homeless patrons? Have there been disagreements between you and your colleagues over homeless patrons? What is your understanding of librarians’ roles?
Q11: Points about libraries’ role in homeless patrons’ lives:
“Libraries are the safe place to better the homeless’ lives; Developing relevant policy at the local and national level is an important goal.”
Refer to Q11 points: Do you think that is true? Why? Do you agree that developing relevant policy is needed?

E. Any other comments
Q12: Point about homeless population.
“The population of rough sleepers in Auckland has doubled in the past 10 years,” according to Auckland City Mission.
Refer to above information: Are you aware of this fact? How do you think this will impact public libraries in the future?
Q13: After thinking about our interview, is there anything else you want to comment on? Is there anything may consider changing for the programmes/events you’re involved in?
About the authors

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