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THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM: DEFINITIONS, SCOPE AND EXTENT, HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES, AND DIVERSE CLIENTELE

Problem Patrons: All Shapes and Sizes

Kelly D. Blessinger

SUMMARY. Every type of library will inevitably have problem patrons, but this article focuses mainly on public and academic libraries. As the times have changed, so has the magnitude of the problem patrons. Problems of the past seem irrelevant compared to some of the problems we are currently facing. Discussed in this article are particular types of problem behavior, including, but not limited to anger, harassment of staff, and homelessness. The types of each category include examples to illustrate each concern, and possible remedies. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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PROBLEM PATRONS

A problem patron could be defined as someone who infringes on others' enjoyment of the library by displaying behavior that is deemed destructive, criminal, bothersome, offensive, or otherwise inappropriate to the norms of behavior in libraries or society. Since a librarian's role is to work in a client/patron based environment, the employee has to learn to control their immediate impulse to react to negative situations, which usually would not be a proper solution, and in many cases is a test in self-control. Employees have to keep in mind that problem patrons are usually the exception from the norm, and usually entail only a small percentage of the total client base. The negative situations are certainly the scenarios that seem to remain in our minds though, rather than those of the polite patrons. While "problem patrons" and "problem people" exist in every type of library and place where humans gather, the focus in this article will mainly be on those that exist in the public and academic domain.

ANGER

Anger usually stems from underlying feelings, whether they are frustration, lack of power, inadequacy, or feeling as though we have not been treated fairly. Anger is a reaction to these underlying feelings, and not a very constructive or positive one. As librarians, we have to do our best to defuse the patron's anger. Having people react inappropriately to situations is inevitable. We can never please everyone, but what librarians can control is our reaction to the anger in question.

As librarians, we have to rise above the negativity, and be the better person. Sometimes just having someone to listen and sympathize is all the patrons need. First and foremost, we should let the person explain why they are upset. From there, we should try to be understanding and reassure the patron that we recognize his or her problem. We should try to offer any available solutions to the problem in question, and not resort to taking the anger of the patrons personally. Usually the patron is mad at the situation, and not the person, but will become angry with anyone that represents the institution that created their anger. The old

maxim, "the customer is always right," certainly is not true. However, unless patrons are physically or emotionally abusive, we should try to reason with them, and alleviate their anger without becoming emotional ourselves.

HARASSMENT OF STAFF

Although harassment of staff can tie in with anger, there are other forms of harassment as well. They can come in the forms of stalking, unwanted sexual advances, or anything that may make a staff member feel uncomfortable or in danger. Unfortunately, staff sometimes feel as if they have no power over the person that is causing them the distress, and are reluctant to inform their supervisor of the matter. Worse yet, some administrators would rather ignore the problem in the hopes that it will go away rather than confronting it head on. A lot of managers feel powerless to confront a problem, and have no legal right to do so until a crime is committed. In a survey based on public libraries in three Midwestern states in 1996-97, seventy one percent reported a problem with staff harassment leading to expulsion or arrest in the previous 12 months (Lorenzen, 135).

In 1992 a suit was filed against the Freeport Illinois Public Library regarding the expulsion of a factory worker, Leonard Brinkmeier. The defendant made an unwanted sexual pass at a female staff member by giving her a note in the library's parking lot that read "If you love me, continue wearing low cut dresses, and bending over" (American Libraries, 1993). The police issued a no trespass order against the defendant, but he continued to call her at work repeatedly and circle the library and the residence of her grandmother numerous times. The initial suit that Brinkmeier filed against the library's director stated that his first amendment rights had been violated. When this case was dismissed, he filed another suit. The second suit claimed that the library's policy of expulsion violated his First Amendment Rights. He did not seek a monetary award from the library; he just wanted to regain access. Brinkmeier's attorney, Robert Slattery, claimed that the defendant was simply expressing an interest in the woman, and did not mean any harm. Because the letter was non-threatening, the police were powerless to take any action. In the end, the court ruled to allow Brinkmeier admittance, and also ruled that the library would have to pay the defendant's attorney fees in the amount of $3,000. The defendant is continuing to

use the library, so far without incident, but the female staff member decided to resign from her position (American Libraries, 1993).

CRIME

Public libraries have a greater incidence of crime, but crime can occur in any type of library. Some libraries are now forced to employ security guards to patrol the library. Installation of video surveillance equipment and other devices are also used as deterrents in many libraries. The library, once considered a safe haven, can now be a place where deviants go to find their victims. Rapes, murders, destruction of property, and other acts of violence are becoming more commonplace. In 1999 the Hamilton County Library in Cincinnati had such a problem. A man was reported to have twice attempted rape in the women's restroom and in the stairwell. An eighteen-year-old man was apprehended in the case, even though proper security measures had already been in place, with "53 security cameras in the building, 24 hour security guards, and Cincinnati police officers during public hours" (American Libraries, 2000). A spokesman for the library maintained that there were nine security guards in place when the attacker attempted rape for the second time (American Libraries, 2000). Another case in 1999 involved a Russian immigrant walking into the Mormon Church of Salt Lake City, opening fire, killing two patrons, and injuring five others before police shot him to death. The perpetrator was said to have been schizophrenic and not taking his medication (Galloway, 1999).

DESTRUCTION OF PROPERTY

Wherever there is a product there will always be the potential for the destruction of property. The damage can be caused unintentionally, by normal wear and tear, or intentionally, from theft or vandalism of materials. It is hard to estimate the loss of materials because theft and destruction are largely covert acts, and libraries may not know for years whether a periodical or book has been damaged. In a case of deliberate destruction, Belulah High School in North Dakota was a target of vandals in March, 2000. Although the whole school was defaced, the library was the hardest hit. Computers were destroyed, windows were broken, tables were overturned and books were knocked from the shelves (American Libraries, 2000). In 1999 an extremely rare book

written by Galileo was to be auctioned by Christie's when it was discovered that it had been stolen from the Polish National Library. Upon investigation, the Bulgarian student who had stolen the book was said to have in his property over 60 books and materials from the library (Library Journal, 1999). Thefts in 1991 and 1992 led to the closing of the Library of Congress's open stack policy. As a result of this, security measures such as surveillance equipment, theft deterring devices and security guards were employed. It seemed as though even the most reputable people could not be trusted. A doctor, a lawyer and a rare book dealer were all found guilty of theft (Billington, 40).

UNATTENDED CHILDREN

While public libraries and academic libraries both have problem patrons, there are some problems that are unique to the different types of libraries. This is not to deny that these problems do not exist in other libraries. The fact is that the rate of the occurrence is more common in particular types of libraries. Public libraries, for example, tend to have higher rates of unattended children and homeless.

While reading and learning should be a part of every child's life, sometimes this positive experience can produce negative results. Libraries are sometimes used as daycare for unattended children. Some parents will drop off their children alone at the library, while they carry on with their lives at a different location. For children who are mature enough to independently enjoy the library's atmosphere and respect the needs of other patrons, being left on their own can have no negative implications. However, this is not always the case. As much as librarians may empathize with such situations, it may be hard for them to rightfully accept the fact that babysitting was a required component of the MLIS degree. This is where a policy manual can be put to a good use. The Fairfax County Library located outside of Washington, DC ruled that no child under seven should ever be left alone. Children seven to nine could be left alone for an hour and a half, and children aged ten to eleven were only allowed to be left alone for three hours at a time (Bang, 197). This policy could not be labeled discriminatory, because it is consistent for those children according to their age level, and not their maturity level. The blame in these scenarios has to be placed with the negligent parents, and not on the children. The parents should first be alerted to the rules of the library, and proper action should be taken if they repeatedly ignore the rules.

HOMELESSNESS

The problem of homeless patrons can occur at any library, but it is most prevalent in public libraries. This might be due to the misconception by much of the public that only faculty and students are allowed into academic libraries. Maybe some homeless people fear that they would be more apt to be noticed in academic libraries. On the other hand, everyone knows that public libraries are for the public, and everyone, even the homeless have the right to use them.

Urban areas seem to have the largest problem with the homeless, because generally, cities have a higher rate of homelessness than rural areas. Location of libraries within the cities is also a key factor. If the library is within distance of a homeless shelter, naturally the occurrence of the homeless in the library will be much higher. An example of this is the main branch of the Richland County Public Library in Columbia, South Carolina. It is located across the street from the Oliver Gospel Mission, which provides shelter and services for homeless men. While the Gospel Mission provides a great service to the community and should be commended, it also naturally tends to bring homeless people to a central location. The large majorities of the homeless are without transportation, and tend to congregate in areas within walking distance, especially those that are free. At almost any given time, there will be at least one homeless person in the Richland County Public Library.

This issue is a very hot topic within libraries today. While wanting to be sympathetic to the homeless, many people tend to be uncomfortable around them. The homeless tend to carry a stigma of either being crazy or dangerous. Whether it is their unkempt appearance, their odor, or their odd behavior, the general public and librarians often do not know how to react. Unless they cause a direct threat to another patron, or the library, they should be allowed in the library. Still, even without posing a direct threat, the homeless still may make some patrons ill at ease. A good example would be the homeless patron who makes no illusion of reading, or any use of material, and openly stares at patrons. Women patrons especially will become uncomfortable in such situations, because they are not sure if a confrontation will occur.

Another problem is homeless patrons using the libraries as a home base for sleeping, and for personal hygiene. This tends to make some of the non-homeless so uncomfortable that they will not use the public restrooms.

PAST vs. CURRENT PROBLEMS

Compared to the present, the problems libraries faced in the past seem a bit laughable. As the times have changed, so have the problems and their severity. When the largest problems of libraries in the past were noisy patrons and food in the library, librarians had much less to worry about, and they certainly never feared for their lives:

> The 'problem patron' who in the mid-70's was a mere annoyance is now often perceived as a real threat. Many of the people who walk through the doors of public libraries today are frightening in aspect and behavior and appear to be deranged. They are victims of homelessness, hopelessness, unemployment, or a mental health system that has abandoned them. (Milnor-Smith, 316)

In addition to the growing incidence of anger, violence and otherwise inappropriate behavior, the library has seen great changes with the boom of the electronic age. Recently librarians at the Minneapolis Public Library's Central Library filed a case with the Equal Opportunity Commission, stating that they felt the ease of patrons access to pornography made the work environment uncomfortable for many of the female employees (Legal Facts, 2000).

The American Library Association stands firm behind their stance that there should be free access to all materials, and no filtering software should be in place, but did they take into account how this may make some of the workers feel, and how people have been charged with harassment for far less? Since most librarians are female, a case could definitely be made regarding this issue. Where should we draw the line? Is viewing graphic material a right of anyone that comes into the library, even though the computers are intended for research? At the same library a six year old boy was observed to have been viewing and printing out pornography in the children's section. It was also found that sex offenders were starting to congregate at the library, and at certain times the librarians had reported that as many as one fourth of the computers in the library were being used to view pornography. One staff member was quoted as saying that "the only other place that resembles our environment right now is an adult bookstore" (Legal Facts, 2000).

CONCLUSION

While some of the aforementioned scenarios are extreme and uncommon, we still must be prepared to deal with problems of this magnitude arising. We must strive to make the library a welcome place for all, because if the general public is uncomfortable using the library, this could lead to the lack of funding because of a lack of public interest, or proposed need. One thing that all libraries should do to protect themselves against problem patrons is to set clear and concise guidelines in print. By doing this, the library will know what steps to take when a problem occurs. Being consistent with problems will ensure that everyone who displays the negative behavior will be treated equally, and would have no basis to claim otherwise. An attorney should read the policies to check for legality, and to make certain that the guidelines are not vague or discriminatory, so that it would hold up in a court of law. Once the document has been checked, the library should hold training sessions to familiarize all staff with the new policies. While "problem patrons" are inevitable, and often out of our control, our reactions to them, and our policies regarding them are not.

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