

From Nuisances to Neighbors: Inclusion of Patrons Experiencing Homelessness through Library and Social Work Partnerships

Mary A. Provence

Abstract: *Public libraries have found themselves, often reluctantly, on the frontline of homelessness. By virtue of being temperature-controlled public spaces with free internet access, libraries provide daytime shelter for thousands of patrons experiencing homelessness. Sometimes considered “problem patrons,” persons experiencing homelessness are at times unfairly targeted by library policies. Violations create the potential for police involvement and arrest, and may contribute to the criminalization of homelessness. Simultaneously, a trend is beginning to emerge of libraries providing or co-locating social services for persons experiencing homelessness. As library services expand, schools of social work have the opportunity to lend both their research and practice expertise. Specifically, schools of social work have the opportunity to partner with public libraries to conduct localized needs assessments of persons experiencing homelessness. Needs assessments should include the direct surveying of patrons, including those experiencing homelessness, to make sure resulting recommendations for library programs and services will be inclusive of all patrons.*

Keywords: *Criminalization; homelessness; libraries; needs assessment; problem patron*

Libraries have a unique opportunity to interact with people experiencing homelessness. As public spaces that are warm in the winter, cool in the summer, and dry in the rain, with the added bonuses of free internet, computer, and bathroom access, libraries are natural gathering places for people experiencing homelessness. While librarians have struggled for decades to grapple with the issues surrounding patrons experiencing homelessness, some libraries are forging ahead to meet the social service needs of patrons experiencing homelessness (Brashear, Maloney, & Thornton-Jarunge, 1981; Simmons, 1985).

Increasingly, libraries are acting as service delivery hubs. In 2009, the City and County of San Francisco created the nation’s first Public Library social work position and hired Leah Esguerra, Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, to assist patrons experiencing homelessness at the San Francisco Public Library (L. Esguerra, personal communication, November 13, 2018; Public Broadcasting Services, 2015; Tranin Blank, 2014). Other libraries are following San Francisco’s lead. The Pima County Library in Arizona, in partnership with their local health department, has a team of public health nurses including one full-time public health nurse who provides a variety of basic health services including case management (Pima Public Library, n.d.). Since 2013, the Homeless Engagement Initiative of the Dallas Public Library has served over 4,000 persons experiencing homelessness in various programs, mentoring, and “personalized assistance services” (Dallas Public Library, n.d.b). The Forsythe County Public Library in Winston-Salem, North Carolina hired a peer support specialist who was formerly homeless (Skinner, 2016).

Mary A. Provence, MSW, LCSW is a PhD student, School of Social Work, Indiana University, Indianapolis, IN 46202

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At the King Library in San Jose, California, homeless outreach workers from People Assisting the Homeless have office hours four days a week. In addition, their Social Workers in the Library program provides in-person appointments with volunteer social workers affiliated with the National Association of Social Workers (San Jose Public Library, n.d.). Patterned after the San Jose program, Social Workers in the Library in Encinitas Public Library in San Diego was created with the leadership of a San Diego State University social work intern (Copeland & Sarvela, 2015). Through a partnership with the University of Pennsylvania, the South Philadelphia Community Health and Literacy Center of the Free Library of Philadelphia houses health clinics and a recreation center (Morgan et al., 2016). The Central Library of the Indianapolis Public Library (IPL) system has a resource room stocked with snacks, hygiene items, and lists of community resources where service providers meet with patrons experiencing homelessness. Local service providers including the city's blended response team regularly visit Central Library to check on patrons experiencing homelessness (personal communication, October 12, 2017, Joan Harvey, former IPL Central librarian and current volunteer).

While U.S. libraries are forming collaborations to provide services to this population, persons experiencing homelessness are not systematically being asked about their needs. A survey of the professional literature of the past ten years using EbscoHost revealed six published studies that specifically included the input of people that were experiencing homelessness about their use of libraries. Of these six, three were outside the U.S. in France, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. (Gaudet, 2013; Hodgetts et al., 2008; Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012). Of the three remaining U.S. studies (Kelleher, 2013; Mi, Stefaniak, & Afonso, 2014; Skinner, 2016), only one (Skinner, 2016) took place in the library. The Forsythe County Public Library in North Carolina gathered valuable input from patrons experiencing homelessness including their desire for something to do on Sunday afternoons. As a result, a Sunday movie matinee was started and draws between 50-100 persons each week (Skinner, 2016). The direct input of patrons experiencing homelessness is needed in order to ensure their needs are included in library programming.

To undertake a needs assessment of patrons experiencing homelessness, public libraries could benefit from the expertise of schools of social work. Social work scholars, trained in research and practice, can assess the needs of patrons experiencing homelessness and make recommendations to assist libraries to ensure that their programs and services are accessible and inclusive (Muggleton, 2013). Such partnerships will further the profession's goals of the pursuit of social justice through the fair treatment of oppressed populations. Partnerships with public libraries will also provide schools of social work a new frontier of field placements for both research and practice for students at all levels of study. On this topic, the social work literature is deafeningly silent. A search of the Social Work Abstracts of EbscoHost in January 2018 using the terms "social work," "library," and "homeless" produced zero results.

Scope of Homelessness in the United States

Before delving further into library-social work partnerships to assess the needs of patrons experiencing homelessness, it is helpful to understand the magnitude of homelessness in the United States. Due to the transiency of persons experiencing

homelessness, determining the scope of homelessness in the United States is no easy task. According to the Point In Time (PIT) Count, there were 549,928 persons experiencing homelessness in the United States in January of 2016 (Henry, Watt, Rosenthal, & Shivji, 2016). While this number is high, some consider the estimate inaccurately low. The typical method used to conduct the Point In Time count does not capture “hidden homeless persons” who are “defined as those who live among, but not directly with, the residential population of a community” (Agans et al., 2014, p. 218). The term *hidden homeless* describes persons sleeping on a private property but not in an actual house; instead, they are sleeping in a garage, shed, back porch, etc. (Agans et al., 2014). In addition, the night time PIT count often misses children and unaccompanied youth under the age of 25 (Agans et al., 2014; Travwer & Aguiniga, 2016). Consequently, the actual number of persons experiencing homelessness is likely much higher than the half million the PIT reports. Dennis Calhune, a University of Pennsylvania principal investigator of the PIT reports, has been reported as estimating that in a year’s time, two million people experience homelessness in the United States (Gee, Barney, & O’Malley, 2017). However, since more accurate data is not available, the PIT count will be used for the purpose of this discussion.

Racial minorities are overrepresented in the homeless population, making up roughly 40% of the general population, but comprising 52% of the homeless population (Henry et al., 2016; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). African-Americans comprise 13% of the general population and 39% of the homeless population (Henry et al., 2016; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Men are also overrepresented, making up 49% of the general population but comprising 60% of the homeless population (Henry et al., 2016; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). There were 1,770 transgender persons in the PIT count which was .003% of persons identified in the count (Henry et al., 2016). Children made up 22% of the persons in the 2016 PIT Count; however, due to their fear of being discovered, the actual number of homeless children is thought to be higher (Agans et al., 2014; Henry et al., 2016; Travwer & Aguiniga, 2016). According to the 2016 PIT Count, 20% of the homeless population were mentally ill; 17% chronically used substances; 12% were victims of domestic violence; 7% were veterans, and 2% had HIV/AIDS (United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2016). In addition, 22% of those in the 2016 PIT Count were chronically homeless (Henry et al., 2016).

Contributing factors. The factors contributing to homelessness include: a lack of affordable rental housing, a lack of living wage jobs, a lack of healthcare, domestic violence, mental illness, and addiction (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). A discussion of the impact of structural inequities on minorities, LGBTQ+, immigrants, and veterans would be particularly helpful in understanding the context and causes of homelessness but is beyond the scope of this paper (Nooe & Patterson, 2010). In addition, the opioid crisis, immigration crisis, and natural disasters have also catapulted people into homelessness but are not addressed in this discussion (Chatterjee, Yu, & Tishberg, 2018; Luckman, Strafer, & Lipski, 2016; Ryan & Hartman, 2000).

Definitions. For the purpose of this discussion, *people who are experiencing homelessness* will be used to describe people who do not have permanent housing and whose sleeping arrangements are: a shelter, transitional housing, the street, a car, an abandoned building, a hotel/motel or single room facility, a prison or hospital without a

home to return to, or couch-surfing from place to place [Section 330 of the Public Health Service Act (42 U.S.C., 254b) & HRSA/Bureau of Primary Health Care, Program Assistance Letter 99-12, Health Care for the Homeless Principles of Practice as cited by the National Health Care for the Homeless Council, n.d.]. Library patrons whose circumstances meet this definition will be referred to as *patrons experiencing homelessness*.

Historical Examination of Attitudes Towards Library Patrons Experiencing Homelessness

Prior to a needs assessment, it is important to understand the variety of attitudes that librarians have held in recent decades regarding patrons experiencing homelessness. Libraries have struggled to decide if persons experiencing homelessness are problem patrons to be expelled or patrons to be served (Bardoff, 2015; Redfern, 2002; Simmons, 1985). In the process of surveying Illinois public and university libraries during 1978 and 1979, researchers created a three-tiered typology of “problem patron behavior” (Brashear et al., 1981, p. 343). The lowest level was as follows:

Type One (Relatively Harmless Nuisances): people who do not pose an overt threat or cause disruption, but who may generally be regarded as offensive by the staff or other patrons, such as quiet drunks, people who sit and stare for hours, or people who are offensively dirty and foul-smelling (Brashear et al., 1981, p. 344).

While the typology is specified to categorize behavior, it is clear by the definition of Type One that people are being categorized as “nuisances” throughout the article. They are referred to as “problem patrons” who cause problems for “normal patrons” (Brashear et al., 1981, p. 350). Types Two and Three address patrons who are disruptive, threatening, or violent (Brashear et al., 1981).

By 1985, homelessness was added to Brashear’s et al.’s definition, with the stipulation that “not all disheveled, fetid, or inebriated patrons are homeless” (Simmons, p. 111). Simmons’s literature review of that era demonstrates that when the needs of patrons experiencing homelessness conflicted with housed patrons, the housed patrons were usually favored. He postulates that if the needs of patrons experiencing homelessness were met elsewhere, they might not need to come to the library. He calls on librarians to advocate for the rights of persons experiencing homelessness, so that they will no longer have to use the library as their refuge (Simmons, 1985).

While the topic of adult library patrons experiencing homelessness was included in the literature throughout the 1980’s and early 1990’s, children were left out (Dowd, 1996). To address this gap, a national study was conducted. Sixty-five percent (N=83) of library children’s programming coordinators – some of whom were responding for multiple branches – described programming specific to the needs of children experiencing homelessness (Dowd, 1996). These children’s coordinators agreed that they should provide “sensitivity, flexibility, and...a welcoming environment” for children experiencing homelessness (Dowd, 1996, p. 159).

By the turn of the millennium, the argument over what to do about the “homeless problem” escalated. In his short, but oft-quoted opinion, Cronin (2002) declared that libraries were not “a refuge for the homeless,” and librarians were not “surrogate social workers” (p. 46). However, by the mid twenty-first century, multiple voices were calling for fair treatment of homeless patrons. Hersberger (2005) counters Cronin and declares that lumping all homeless people into the category of problem patrons is “outright discrimination” (p. 200). Ayers (2006) advocated for the expansion of library services for persons experiencing homelessness. Wong (2009) believed it possible to respect the needs of both housed patrons and patrons experiencing homelessness. However, despite the calls of Hersberger, Ayers, and Wong, the argument was not settled. Many librarians, in a survey of 648 American Library Association (ALA) external members, identified poor people as those “who are seen as a nuisance” (Gieskes, 2009, p. 52).

Ferrell (2010) searched the Library and Information Science Abstracts database from the late 1990s forward, and discovered a consistent presence of articles related to “problem patrons.” From a symbolic interactionist approach, Ferrell (2010) proposed that librarians examine who is placing the “deviant” label on a particular patron (p. 144). Ferrell’s alternative approach challenged librarians to ask a series of questions to identify who is determining the behavior as “deviant:” the community (through laws and norms); the Library (through policies, procedures, or norms), or the library staff (through their personal beliefs and values) (Ferrell, 2010, p. 145).

Access to Library Services

Because of the tendency to label patrons without housing as problem patrons, persons experiencing homelessness do not always have fair library access (Bardoff, 2015; Ferrell, 2010). The American Library Association (ALA) is clear about the need for fair access for persons experiencing homelessness. Policy 61, now B.8.10, of the ALA, entitled, Library Services to the Poor, advocates for increased accessibility of libraries for people experiencing poverty:

The American Library Association promotes equal access to information for all people, and recognizes the urgent need to respond to the increasing number of poor children, adults, and families in America. These people are affected by a combination of limitations, including illiteracy, illness, social isolation, homelessness, hunger, and discrimination, which hamper the effectiveness of traditional library services. Therefore, it is crucial that libraries recognize their role in enabling poor people to participate fully in a democratic society, by utilizing a wide variety of available resources and strategies. Concrete programs of training and development are needed to sensitize and prepare library staff to identify poor people’s needs and deliver relevant services (ALA, 2012-2013, p. 40).

The remainder of the Library Services to the Poor specifies various ways for libraries to enact the policy; relevant portions of this policy will be highlighted throughout this discussion.

Library Policies

Negative attitudes towards and stereotypes of persons experiencing homelessness as being dirty or smelly have led to library policies targeting patrons experiencing homelessness including: rules against foul smells, luggage, sleeping, and tending to hygienic needs in library bathrooms (Bardoff, 2015). Hersberger (2005) emphasizes that such policies often have unequal enforcement. For example, a college student would probably not be kicked out of a library for falling asleep while writing a research paper, but it is probable that a patron experiencing homelessness could be expelled for falling asleep.

The code of conduct policies of the libraries mentioned earlier which have some level of social services for patrons experiencing homelessness were reviewed. Seven of the libraries posted their policies online. The eighth, The Philadelphia Free Library, did not have their policy online and is not included. Table 1 presents a summary of prohibitions that directly address persons experiencing homelessness.

Table 1. *Library Policy Prohibitions by Location*

	Sleeping	Bathing	Large items, i.e. luggage/ bedrolls	Camping	Strong odor	Lying down	Using more than one seat	Asking for money
Dallas, TX	X	X	X		X			X
Forsythe Co., NC	*	X						X
Indianapolis, IN	X				X			X
Pima Co., AZ	X	X	X		X			X
San Diego, CA	X	**	X	X	X	X	X	X
San Francisco, CA	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
San Jose, CA	***	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<i>Notes: *Prolonged sleeping prohibited; **Use of facilities for “living or accommodation purposes” prohibited; *** Sleeping while lying down prohibited. (Dallas Public Library, n.d.b; Forsythe County Public Library, 2017; Indianapolis Public Library, 2011; Pima County, Arizona Board of Supervisors, 2015; San Diego County Library, n.d.; San Francisco Public Library Commission, 2014; San Jose Public Library, 2014; & San Jose Public Library, 2017a).</i>								

The Forsythe County Library – the library that has published survey results that included patrons experiencing homelessness (Skinner, 2016) – has the least number of policy barriers; instead of prohibiting all sleeping, Forsythe prohibits only “prolonged sleeping” (Forsythe County Public Library, 2017).

The policy statements of each of the seven libraries indicate that violations of the code of conduct can result in suspension from the library. The San Jose Public Library specifies suspension periods ranging from one day to two years depending on the severity of the offense (San Jose Public Library, 2017b). San Francisco differentiates suspensions based on severity and lists one to seven day suspensions for minor infractions but specify that persons sleeping or lying down will be asked to correct or leave but are not suspended (San

Francisco Public Library Commission, 2014). The remaining five libraries do not specify the length of the suspensions in the online codes of conduct. Depending on the severity of the situation and the compliance of the patron, violations of the codes of conduct can result in potential law enforcement involvement up to arrest and prosecution where allowable by law (Dallas Public Library, n.d.a; Forsythe County Public Library, 2017; Indianapolis Public Library, 2011; Pima County, Arizona Board of Supervisors, 2015; San Diego County Library, n.d.; San Francisco Public Library Commission, 2014; San Jose Public Library, 2017a).

The ALA's Hunger, Homelessness, and Poverty Task Force (2005) admonished libraries who target patrons experiencing homelessness through "punitive policies" that are "at best misguided and, at worst, contribute to the criminalization of poor people" (p. 175). Such policies that put patrons experiencing homelessness at risk of potential arrest may be similar in character to laws around the country that are "primarily intended to reduce the presence of homeless people in specific locations or in an entire community, in an effort to maintain or improve public safety, economic stability, and aesthetic appeal" (Aykanian & Lee, 2016, p. 183). Instead of trying to address the systemic issues that cause homelessness, "The current restrictions on homeless people's behavior in public space are clearly an effort to regulate space so as to eliminate homeless people, not homelessness" (Mitchell, 2003, p. 167).

Public librarians often find themselves navigating the difficult space between patrons who are housed and patrons experiencing homelessness. The library policies that appear to target persons experiencing homelessness are often an attempt to maintain order and appease housed patrons. This is a difficult position for libraries to be in. To consider how to balance and navigate through these competing demands libraries face, let us look deeper at the philosophical underpinnings of these policies.

Attitudes Towards Persons Experiencing Homelessness: A New View

A philosophical perspective that is helpful when considering how policy makers at both the library and local government level, as well as social work researchers, view patrons experiencing homelessness comes from the Arbinger Institute (2008). Arbinger's conclusions are in part based on the thoughts of Heidegger, a philosopher who, in his seminal work published in 1926, *Being and Time*, "shifted the focus of the philosophical world away from the separate self and onto the idea of being with others" (Arbinger Institute, 2008, pp. 78-79). Arbinger (2008) also delves into the thoughts of Buber from his seminal work *I and Thou* published in 1923 that proposed:

...that there are basically two ways of being in the world: we can be in the world seeing others as people or we can be in the world seeing others as objects. He called the first way of being the I-Thou way and the second the I-It way, and he argued that we are always, in every moment, being either I-Thou or I-It - seeing others as people or seeing others as objects (Arbinger Institute, 2008, p. 79).

According to Arbinger (2008), when we view others as people, we recognize that they have goals, ideas, thoughts, feelings, needs, and values that are as important to them as ours are to us. When we view others as objects, we view them in one of three ways: as

“obstacles” who are “in our way,” “vehicles” to use for our own purposes, or “irrelevancies” who are unimportant (Arbinger Institute, 2016, para. 2-3).

Using this framework, we can examine how library staff, patrons, and social work researchers view patrons experiencing homelessness. Do we see them as individuals who are equal to us? Are we willing to be attentive to the special needs persons experiencing homelessness bring to the public space of the library? Or, do we see them as objects to be scorned and shunned? Do we see them as obstacles who are in our way of having a quiet and undisturbed place to read, study, or relax? Even more subtle, do we see persons experiencing homelessness as projects that make us feel good about ourselves for helping – at their expense? As a social work researcher, do I see them as an opportunity to put a scholarly feather on my curriculum vitae, or do I see them as people with individual identities, strengths, and needs to be discovered and reported so recommendations can be made for helpful change?

Whether librarians view persons experiencing homelessness as objects or as people impacts both the policies they create and how they are enforced. The ALA’s Policy on the Poor necessitates the review of pertinent local library policies and their enforcement to see if they are unfairly targeting persons experiencing homelessness (Ayers, 2006; Hersberger, 2005). Specifically, subsections B.8.10.1.1 and B.8.10.1.11 of the ALA Policy on the Poor promotes “the removal of all barriers to library and information services, particularly fees and overdue charges” and “training to sensitize library staff to issues affecting poor people and to attitudinal and other barriers that hinder poor people’s use of libraries” (ALA, 2012-2013, pp. 40-41). Being willing to honestly evaluate how we view persons experiencing homelessness and to change our attitudes when needed is critical to not only evaluating policies for fairness but also for planning services.

The Case for Surveying Persons Experiencing Homelessness

Because of the objectifying and patronizing of persons experiencing homelessness, services, when they exist, for the most part have been designed for them rather than with them. ALA’s Policy for the Poor Section B.8.10.1.9 directly calls for “community needs assessments, giving special emphasis to assessing the need so [sic, of] low-income people and involving both anti-poverty advocates and poor people themselves in such assessments” (ALA, 2012-2013, p. 41). However, based on my literature review, talking directly to patrons experiencing homelessness at libraries in a systematic way has been rare.

This neglect has been partially due to service providers relying on their own intuition about the needs of persons experiencing homelessness rather than conducting needs assessments that ask the population directly (Acosta & Toro, 2000). A longitudinal study of 301 persons experiencing homelessness, while somewhat dated and geographically specific to Buffalo, NY, counters what may be a logical assumption: that housing is the number one need of people experiencing homelessness (Acosta & Toro, 2000). Persons experiencing homelessness in their study had needs they considered more important than housing – safety and education (Acosta & Toro, 2000). It may seem intuitive to ask homeless service providers to identify the needs of people experiencing homelessness.

However, most service providers have not experienced homelessness, and while they are an important informant in helping libraries understand local services and collaboration opportunities, the primary starting point should be systematically asking the patrons experiencing homelessness to identify their needs.

Some researchers or librarians may argue patrons may be offended if we ask them if they are homeless, a concern Kelleher (2013) expressed, choosing instead to research library usage by persons experiencing homelessness at places other than the library. The Forsythe County Public Library overcame this quandary by administering the survey to all library patrons with a question about residence with a response option of “no permanent address,” allowing them to identify the needs of patrons experiencing homelessness without the risk of offending patrons (Skinner, 2016, p. 5).

The University of Pennsylvania used the Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach to assess how library programming at the Free Library of Philadelphia addressed social determinants of health (Morgan et al., 2016). The CBPR approach provides a framework for conducting needs assessments of persons experiencing homelessness (Leung, Yen, & Minkler, 2004). This model emphasizes researching “with” rather than “on” a given community and “shifts the decision-making authority away from experts and embraces the experiential knowledge of the average citizen” (Leung et al., 2004, p. 500). The discovery of the needs of patrons experiencing homelessness should be a collaborative process that “exposes and challenges the structural powers that oppress” and leads to action (Leung et al., 2004, p. 501).

Not only should patrons experiencing homelessness be asked what they need, they should have representation in the decision-making of library policies and services related to poverty and homelessness. After surveying 648 external members of the ALA, the Hunger, Homelessness and Poverty Task Force of the ALA recommended that libraries include people who are poor as well as service agencies in their decision-making, emphasizing that being a librarian or a member of the ALA should not be necessary to assist in decision-making around issues of poverty (Gieskes, 2009). This call for action is also reflected in the ALA’s Policy Manual Section B.8.10.1.10 which calls for “Promoting direct representation of poor people and anti-poverty advocates through appointment to local boards and creation of local advisory committees on service to low-income people, such appointments to include library-paid transportation and stipends” (ALA, 2012-2013, p. 41). Offering stipends and transportation for persons experiencing homelessness would help increase the feasibility of their participation.

Facilitating the participation of patrons experiencing homelessness in the decision-making process may help prevent the incorrect assumption that their needs are all alike (Hersberger, 2005). Too often, we deny patrons experiencing homelessness their unique histories of education, employment, housing, and/or military service. We fail to see their strengths and the individual reasons that have led them to be without a home (Hersberger, 2005). Needs assessments of patrons experiencing homelessness should be done at the local or regional level, to assess needs that may be geographically and historically specific, such as a factory closing down, an influx of immigrants, a natural disaster, or a local drug epidemic.

Some may counter that libraries already have strapped budgets and are unable to conduct a needs assessment to determine the needs of patrons experiencing homelessness. Partnering with a school of social work can provide scholarly research rigor, without the expense of hiring a research firm. Such partnerships can also provide schools of social work with field placements for research and possibly practice. Social work students, supervised by faculty, can create and administer surveys including in-person interviews with patrons. In partnership with patrons experiencing homelessness, social work students or faculty can analyze the data and make service recommendations. While Kelley, Riggelman, Clara, and Navarro (2017) did not interview persons experiencing homelessness, their needs assessment to determine if the local library needed a social worker provides an example of a local public library partnering with MSW students at a private university. This undertaking met a need for the public library and provided field research experience for students.

As libraries learn the needs of patrons experiencing homelessness through such research partnerships, it is critical to discuss next steps. Muggleton (2013) provides great caution in this area: due to the isolation, stigma, and stereotypes that persons experiencing homelessness already face, we do not want to turn the library into a place that inadvertently leads to the further stereotyping of persons experiencing homelessness and a further separation of the housed and unhoused. Libraries are “spaces of care where homeless people can be included” and can “be present as regular library patrons” (Hodgetts et al., 2008, p. 950). Having homeless-only services homogenizes, increases isolation, and may prevent people who do not want to be identified as homeless from seeking services (Muggleton, 2013). Instead, libraries can address the needs of patrons experiencing homelessness in the context of broader library services and programs: many of the services, such as job search assistance, that patrons experiencing homelessness find helpful are also useful to housed patrons (Muggleton, 2013). By promoting inclusion of patrons experiencing homelessness in the larger context of library services, we can decrease isolation and provide the opportunity for housed and unhoused patrons to interact and learn from and about one another (Gaudet, 2013; Hodgetts et al., 2008; Muggleton, 2013).

Conclusion

The convergence of persons experiencing homelessness in the space of public libraries has brought both librarians and social workers to a new frontier of opportunity. Every day librarians have the privilege to interact with patrons experiencing homelessness who “are seeking opportunities, however minimal, to help them further their education, find affordable and stable housing, and maintain gainful employment to have productive lives” (Acosta & Toro, 2000, p. 363). Schools of social work can be instrumental in helping libraries to survey the needs of patrons experiencing homelessness and ultimately offer recommendations for programs and services that are inclusive of their needs to move us toward a more just society. As social work rises to meet the Grand Challenge of Ending Homelessness, interdisciplinary collaboration between the fields of library science and social work is pivotal to our success (Henwood et al., 2015). Depending on how we see our homeless neighbors - as people or as objects - will determine how librarians and social workers alike respond to this opportunity of convergence.

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- Author note:** Address correspondence to: Mary Provence, MSW, LCSW, School of Social Work, Indiana University, 902 West New York Street, Indianapolis, IN 46202. mscifres@iupui.edu