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This paper presents the perceptions of five homeless library users of a public library. Homeless participants were interviewed in order to obtain information about both their perceptions of their own library activities and their perceptions of library service. The participant selection criterion was based on residence at the Durham Urban Ministries homeless shelter in Durham, NC and on evidence of use of the Central library of the Durham Public Library system. All participants answered several questions regarding their perceptions of this public library, frequency of use of the library and their current length of residency at Durham Urban Ministries homeless shelter.

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HOMELESS PERSPECTIVES OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

by
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HOMELESS PERSPECTIVES OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Introduction

In *Coping with the library's problem patrons* (1988), Charles A. Salter and Jeffrey L. Salter write about library patrons,

It is in these trenches, on the frontlines, that we public servants encounter the shock troops who oppose us daily. We euphemistically call them "problem patrons," but they are far less patrons than they are problems: they are the sociopaths and psychotics, the homeless and hopeless. They are patrons in the sense that they enter our facilities needing help; they are problems because most libraries do not provide the type of assistance or referral which would be appropriate to their conditions of illness, psychosis, or poverty. (p. xiii)

Many public librarians serve a very diverse patron body, and it can include patrons who do not have homes. Like many groups of information seekers, librarians and sociologists alike have analyzed their needs and behaviors.

Some librarians, like the Salters, have focused on the difficulties of working with homeless patrons. These difficulties include: assigning fiscal responsibility in the form of a library card to a patron who cannot provide a home address, resolving tensions between homeless and non-homeless library patrons, and providing equitable access of library resources to homeless patrons (Silver, 1996). In an attempt to alleviate some of these difficulties some libraries have provided homeless patrons with special library cards and

special assistance. Others have continued to view homeless users as “problem patrons.”

Homeless voices, with few exceptions, have been absent from the library discourse concerning their presence in libraries. Consequently, perceived homeless access to information is of primary concern in this research project. How do homeless patrons judge their ability to access information in their public library? What do they have to say about their experiences in libraries?

An investigation of perceptions of information access will contribute to the already burgeoning field of user access issues. Instead of assuming that we know what homeless patrons may want or feel in public libraries, as information professionals we will be able to read for ourselves what some homeless patrons have said about their own experiences. Because homelessness affects many aspects of urban life, analyzing the role that libraries play in the everyday life of the homeless can contribute to society’s understanding of homeless experiences. Instead of a monolithic group who are sometimes painted in a burdensome hue, perhaps more people will come to see homeless people as individuals who have needs that no spokesman can articulate. With their own voices, homeless people can let the library know who they are.

Relevant Literature

Literature on homeless library patrons is scarce and variable. While there are a lot of research sources available concerning other aspects of

homeless life, there is little in the way of scholarly studies about homeless library patrons. In order to learn more about homeless library patrons I utilized three non-conventional research paths: I reviewed the library science literature that directly discussed homeless patrons and or pertinent information seeking behavior; second, I reviewed some non-information science studies that discussed the needs of homeless people; and finally I analyzed some theoretical explorations of the personal perspective in order to test the value of a homeless perspective based approach.

The library science literature indicates that there are many social occurrences that have contributed to the great increase of homeless library patrons in urban areas. Some of these social occurrences include a focus on medication for the mentally ill instead of hospitalization, resulting in a huge turnout of mentally ill patients from hospitals, many of whom are currently homeless (Salter, 1988). Another cause of increased homelessness in the 1980's was decreasing government budgets to assist with housing costs (Simmons, 1985). The social circumstances contributing to homelessness in America are pertinent to the research because these circumstances influence how homeless people are perceived by librarians and therefore, how they are served. It is also important to analyze what social circumstances have contributed to the homeless occupation of public libraries in order to understand their specific information needs.

Some papers provide useful statistical descriptions of homeless people in the U.S., characterizing them as a group. In these papers a series of legal

cases pertaining to homeless patrons in the library are described (Cart, 1992, Salter, 1988, Silver, 1996). While hardly any homeless people are asked about their perceptions of libraries many librarians are asked about homeless patrons. One librarian in California discouraged service to homeless patrons because they “had an affect on the donor population. Many prospective donors are reluctant to give money to support a Central Library that they perceive as a day facility for the homeless. Many donors indicate that they do not feel safe visiting the Central Library or that the Central Library smells of people who have not bathed in sometime” (Marchand & Noble, 1999). Other librarians mention that homeless patrons negatively affect library donations (Grace 2000, Simmons, 1985, Marchand & Noble, 1999). This negative attitude towards homeless patrons may be one of the reasons that their voices are almost absent from the literature.

In many instances, homeless library patrons are perceived as problematic by library staff (Cart 1992, Simmons, 1985). Often past research has been based on anecdotal accounts by librarians who describe the homeless as people who primarily bathe and sleep in the library (Grace, 2000, Simmons, 1985). Themes that recur in the literature are that the homeless offend staff and other non-homeless patrons, and that they do not use the library for what it was intended to be (Simmons, 1985).

The library science literature also provides evidence of efforts made by library professionals to include homeless users in their accessibility considerations. One example of this inclusion is the 1990 Public Library

Association conference. *An American Libraries* article summarizes the agendas of the 1990 PLA conference. One such agenda was the ever-momentous task of meeting the informational needs of all users. The homeless were noted as an information-seeking group whose needs could be better met in the future. Anecdotes were shared amongst public librarians who described various encounters with homeless patrons (Kniffel, 1991). While this source did provide the context in which homelessness was approached within the library profession, it lacked specific proposed methodology to serve homeless patrons, failing to provide concrete data.

How public librarians interact with homeless patrons impacts not just library service but also accessibility (Simmons, 1985). There are many ways that libraries can limit homeless public library access. Some libraries have banned, “sleepy and smelly,” patrons (Simmons, 1985, p 116). Support for these bans have been based on potential health risks caused by a lack of hygiene (Simmons, 1985). By requiring that library cardholders produce a home address with identification, libraries by the definition of homelessness, can directly limit homeless book borrowing (Kniffel, 1991, Silver, 1996, Simmons, 1985).

Other non-library science oriented research also provided information about possible homeless information needs. One major study revealed that most homeless people are looking for work and information about potential work (National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients, 1996). This same study shows that two thirds of homeless people indicate that they

have a problem with alcohol, drugs or mental health (NSHAPC, 1996). It is important to note that homeless is not synonymous for being workless, as one third of all homeless people in America work (Grace, 2000). Some opponents of homeless library patrons argue that the homeless do not pay taxes and therefore should not receive service; but because many homeless people are working or have worked in the past, this argument does not hold weight (Hersberger, 1999). These population characteristics can be used to form pertinent interview questions for homeless library patrons.

Some scholars in the information science field have long given credence to the power of personal perspective in research. Patrick Wilson (1983) uses the term, "cognitive authority," to refer to authority granted to individuals to be experts about their own experiences. The everyday experience of homeless people grants them the authority to talk about their own lives. Almost twenty years ago in support of this perspective, Randall Simmons (1985), suggested that "An attempt should be made to understand the issue from the homeless patron's point of view, to understand the nature of homelessness and their needs. This is clearly lacking in the library literature" (p 117). More recently, Julia Hersberger interviewed homeless families to determine their information needs and sources (Hersberger, 1998). Even though 85% of homeless people are single and do not have custody of their children, for those that are raising children, information about education and employment were constantly in demand (Grace, 2000, Hersberger, 1998).

Excluding homeless perspectives from the library literature limits the knowledge that librarians can obtain about this segment of library users. Conclusively, except for Hersberger, the literature suggests that there has been little research done in the way of obtaining homeless perspectives of library use. In addition to this lack of inquiry, there is also a pervading theme in in which librarians perceive homeless library users as problematic. Julia Hersberger has helped to pave the way of future researchers by interviewing and observing homeless families who use libraries. By interviewing the users, Hersberger gives credence to the personal perspective of the library user. The power of personal perspective has been well documented by researchers, and it has influenced the choice of method used in this study.

Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to investigate what activities some homeless people who use public libraries engage in while in the library and to evaluate how satisfied these people are with the service they receive in public libraries. Because much of the library science literature written about homeless library users has focused on the librarian's perspective of what homeless people do in libraries, this project sought to gather a more inclusive perspective of homeless library use by focusing on some homeless peoples' perspectives on their own information issues in one public library. Five homeless library patrons were interviewed. Interviewing, as a methodology, was used because

it is one of the best ways to obtain qualitative data from a limited pool of research subjects (Patton, 1990).

To obtain interviews, the Durham Urban Ministries homeless shelter of Durham, NC was asked to identify homeless people who both spend at least one day a week in a public library and who may be willing to talk about their experiences in public libraries in the form of an interview. The Durham Urban Ministries was chosen as the contact shelter because it is across the street from the Durham Public Library central branch. Working with Durham Urban Ministries limited the possibility of falsely identifying people who are not homeless and meant that independent definitions of homelessness were not required. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, homeless people who were eligible for interviews were all homeless shelter occupants; the Durham Urban Ministries confirmed their status. Informants received a \$10.00 honorarium for their participation, but they were free to withdraw from the interview process without prejudice. Prior consent was obtained verbally by recording the handout form read aloud before interviews commenced. The informants verbally agreed to everything read in the handout and stated their names and the date for the recorder. In the report that follows, no identifying characteristics of informants are present.

Handouts that listed the study's purpose, participant criteria and incentives were created for distribution at Durham Urban Ministries. The handouts were given to one of the shelter employees who ran a men's drug rehabilitation program, among other programs within the shelter. This

employee would become my primary contact person at the shelter. The contact person, in addition to adhering to the informant criterion listed in the handouts, was instructed that eligible study informants must reside at the Durham Urban Ministries shelter and must use the library weekly. The contact person was also told to limit the amount of recruited informants to fewer than six people. Consequently, because the contact person was also the leader of the men's drug rehabilitation program, all recruited informants are admittedly recovering drug addicts.

The contact person chose ten potential informants for me to meet. Upon meeting the potential informants, I would soon find out that my contact person had failed to distribute the handouts to any of the informants. The contact person chose people who he knew frequented the library and told them that a woman wanted to interview them about their experiences. The informants were screened based on their responses to the following questions.

Do you go to the public library?

Which public library do you go to?

Describe your favorite section in the library.

Five informants were chosen from the ten possible informants. These five were chosen because in addition to saying that they went to the public library and that they went to the one across the street to the shelter, they could also accurately describe sections of the library. Perceived informant lucidity was

also taken into account when screening possible informants. All chosen informants were men over the age of eighteen. Please see Appendix A for information given to participants, explaining the research project and their rights as subjects.

Informants, Before and After the Interviews

Informant #1 was very enthusiastic about participating in the interview, his enthusiasm and talkative nature is one of the reasons that he was chosen as a study participant. He greeted me with a handshake and a smile. After the interview, the informant was paid a \$10.00 honorarium for his participation. He seemed surprised, and told me that he did not know that they were going to be paid for the interview. As he left the meeting room, he wished me luck with my studies and yelled, "Go Tarheels!"

Upon greeting **Informant #2**, he announced to me, "I am HIV positive and I am a drug addict, and I want you to know that before we go anywhere." I shook his hand and nodded. He followed me into the meeting room where we began the interview. After giving the informant the \$10.00 honorarium, he said, "What? You mean you are going to give me ten bucks just for talking with you. Ain't that something." I answered, "Yes," as I escorted him out of the meeting room and greeted the next informant.

Informant #3 wore sunglasses during the entire interview. I noted it that it was difficult to discern visual cues such as raised eyebrow and closed eyes like those that I had observed with the other informants. His interview tone was

very evasive but his accurate description of the library reference room during the informant screening process assured me that he was indeed someone who frequented the local public library. This informant also seemed surprised when I gave him the \$10.00 honorarium. He folded the ten-dollar bill five times before placing it in his shoe. It would seem that because the study information handout had not been distributed, the \$10.00 honorarium was not the informants' incentive for participating in the study.

I had to walk around the shelter and track down **Informant #4** as he had wandered away from the hallway outside of the meeting room. I recognized him immediately as he was meticulous in dress and extremely polite. He seemed eager to talk. He did not require much coaxing. He responded liberally to most of the questions asked. This informant seemed to be surprised when I gave him the \$10.00 honorarium. It was difficult to end the interview, as there was so much he wanted to say. I shook his hand and wished him good luck.

Informant #5 was waiting at the door as I escorted the fourth informant out of the meeting room. I did not recognize him as one of the originally screened informants. I asked him if we had spoken earlier and he assured me that we had. I led him into the meeting room to commence the interview. This informant did not seem surprised when I offered him the \$10.00 honorarium. Upon leaving the meeting room he asked me, "Should I send the next guy in?" I said, "What next guy? You should be it for the day, unless you took someone else's slot." He looked away and walked down the hallway without responding.

Interview Questions

The following questions served as a basis to obtain study information. Because each informant varied in his particular experience with libraries, upon occasion the questions were modified to accurately capture the individual experience of the library user (McCracken, 1990).

When is the last time you went to the public library?

How many days a week do you come to the public library?

How much time on average do you spend in the public library?

What is the first thing you do on entering the library?

Do you look at magazines? What kind?

Do you look at newspapers? What kind?

Do you read books? What kind?

Do you use the computers? If so, how long do you use them?

Are there other things that you do in library? If so, what do you do?

What places in the library do you use the most?

Do you ask the librarian for help?

Overall, do you feel that you are welcome or unwelcome at this library? Please explain your answer.

These questions were designed to pinpoint the activities of these homeless people in the library and to determine how welcomed they feel within this library. All questions asked by me, the principal investigator, are designated in bold face type. All responses to interview questions by informants are not in bold face type. The interviews took place in a meeting room inside of the shelter. Only the informants and myself were present in the room during the interviews. The interviews took place in the span of one afternoon on April 26, 2002. They were recorded in the order that they appear.

Data: the Interviews

Length of Present Homelessness

The following questions were asked to establish how long the informants had been residents of the Durham Urban Ministries homeless shelter. Because the word homeless can carry a negative stigma, when creating questions to obtain this information, the word homeless was omitted. The word homeless was only used in questions if the informant described himself as homeless first, indicating that he was comfortable with the word. Responses indicate

differences among informants; some of the informants have resided in a couple of different shelters and some informants are residing in a homeless shelter for the very first time.

Informant #1

How long have you been affiliated with the Urban Ministries shelter?

How long have I actually been here this time?

Yes.

About six months. I am in a program here now, a rehab program.

Informant #2

How long have you been affiliated with the Urban Ministries shelter?

I was affiliated with the other homeless shelter across the street. I have been affiliated with Urban Ministries recently now about three months now with the rehabilitation program over here.

My contact talked to me a little about that.

It is a good program. One of the better ones I have ever been in. The thing I am feeling so good about is that I am staying clean in a hostile environment.

They are showing me how to live again.

Informant #3

How long have you been affiliated with Urban Ministries shelter?

Around, about seven or eight months.

Is this the only homeless shelter you have been affiliated with?

No. Chapel Hill.

You were in a homeless shelter in Chapel Hill? How long were you there?

Around, about six months.

Informant #4

How long have you been affiliated with the Urban Ministries shelter?

Now going on four months in the recovery program.

Were you in any other shelters before you came here?

No.

Was this your first shelter ever or just your first one recently?

The first one ever.

Informant #5

How long have you been affiliated with Urban Ministries shelter?

For about two and a half to three weeks.

Have you resided at any other shelters before this one?

No.

This is the first shelter you have resided in?

Yes, this is my first.

Frequency

Question related to frequency of library use were asked to pinpoint how often the informants went to the library and how much time they spent there. Some questions were repeated so that an accurate response could be confirmed, though the information here is far from precise. In the context of the interview, obtaining the frequency of library use places time frames on the

activities that the informants engaged in while in the library, and helps them to characterize themselves in the context of the inquiry.

Informant #1

When was the last time you went to the public library?

Yesterday

How long were you there yesterday?

I was there, probably about thirty minutes.

How often do you go to the library? About how many days per week do you go?

I pretty much go about everyday.

Almost everyday?

Yeah, almost everyday.

Do you usually go to the library near here, the one across the street?

Yes, I do.

You said earlier that you went to the library yesterday for about thirty minutes; do you usually spend about thirty minutes in the library?

No, usually more time than that.

About how long would you speculate?

Maybe at least an hour and half to two hours at the most, and that is just when I am reading stuff.

Informant #2

So do you use the library?

Yes.

When was the last time you used the library?

Well actually I had so many classes (drug rehabilitation classes) last week and I was so busy with my doctor's appointment that I missed last week, but today or tomorrow I'll probably get by there (the library). It has been a week though. I go by there to read up on HIV and the history of AIDS and stuff like that too.

It has been about a week or so since you went last?

Yes.

How often would you say, you typically go in a week's time?

Before last week, I was going about three or four times a week, sometimes more than that. Just to get out of here and clear my head and I like to go read. If I am not reading one of those medicine books, I just read wild life books.

How long on average would you say that you spend in the library?

I'm there about a couple of hours each time I go.

Two hours?

Yes, about two and a half.

Informant #3

Do you go to the public library?

Yes, ma'am.

When was the last time you went to the library?

Last Monday.

How long were you there?

Around about, four hours.

Is that how much time you usually spend in the library?

Yes, ma'am.

How many times a week would you speculate that you go to the library?

I try to go there everyday.

Do you go to the library Monday thru Saturday?

Thru Sunday.

Informant #4

When was the last time you used the public library?

I'd say about three days ago.

How much time did you spend in the library?

For an hour and a half or two hours.

About how many days a week do you go to the library?

Any where from...I'd say about four days out of the week.

Do you spend an hour and a half each time you go to the library?

At minimal an hour and a half to two hours, because we have classes and chores and stuff.

So, you spend a pretty good amount of time there?

Yes, I like the library. It helps me with my reading and writing skills.

Informant #5

When was the last time you went to the public library?

Monday.

How long were you there?

Thirty minutes.

Do usually spend thirty minutes in the library?

It depends on what I am doing. If I am trying to get my resume together I am there for an hour or two hours. If I am just reading, just to keep my reading skills up, I am probably there for thirty minutes to an hour.

How many times a week do you usually go to the library?

Maybe twice a week.

You are not a big library user?

No, not that big.

But you do go regularly?

Yes.

Library Activity

The following interview excerpts are instances in which the informants described their library activities. Specific questions with references to activities such as book reading or using the computers were used only to encourage communication and not to lead the informants. In certain instances questions were repeated to increase clarity. The informants' responses to these questions varied, but they had these interests: jobs, health, life issues and shelter.

Informant #1

What do you usually do when you go to the library? Do you go for the books, the magazines, or the computers?

Pretty much I go there on a regular basis to check my email, everyday. Lately I've been going to do some research as it refers to jobs and whatnot, and I pretty much catch the news online on a daily basis. Just for interest, I have an interest in history. I was a history major in college. I read up on a lot of subjects there, and other subjects as they come up as an interest from time to time.

Do you ever check out any books?

Yeah, I do.

Do you look at magazines while you are there?

I rarely read periodicals. As of late I have not been reading that much, no.

So you mainly use the computers when you go to the library?

Mainly the computers, and I also might read some books there on sight, while I'm there. Certain days, I'll do that.

Informant #2

What is the first thing you typically do upon entering the library?

(Silence)

Do you head for a section of books you like? Do you go for the computers? Do you read the newspapers? What is the first thing you do?

Well, I stop by the computers just to see what is going on with them because I have a real interest in learning how to work with those. But most of time I come there, they are already full, so I just go on to my books and pick up there. By that time we have classes almost every two hours here, so once I read

whatever I want to read, it is almost time to come back to class. I come on back then. But when I get some extra time next week, I'm definitely going to see somebody about helping me out to get in to the computers.

So, you talked to me a little bit about being HIV positive and you said go to the library to get information about the virus. Have you found that the library has the kind of information that is helpful to you?

Between them and where I get my treatments at and stuff, pretty much (they have the information). Like I said, I want to learn everything about this thing, the symptoms, the history of it, the whole nine, the treatments of it and commonality amongst treatments. I am trying to be aware of everything about this thing, because I want to live as long as I can with it. Be it as far as eating wise, the dietary part. I try to stay up on all of that.

So you like to read?

Yeah.

You read about the virus, HIV and wild life books?

Yeah.

Informant #3

What is the first thing you do when you enter the library?

I put down my book bag and I look for a book.

Do you have a section of books that you like?

Mostly biology, science or history, something like that.

Do you ever look at the newspapers or the magazines?

Yes, I look at the newspapers and the magazines if they ever change them around.

Are you saying that they (newspapers and magazines) stay the same?

They stay the same too long. They are kind of boring and I don't want to search through them when I see the same thing all of the time.

Do you ever use the computers?

Yeah, to look up jobs and housing. I'm trying to learn how to do a resume.

Basically those are the main things I do on them (computers).

You said you use the library for job and housing searches, to create resumes and read about science and history. Do you use the library for anything else?

No.

Informant #4

What is the first thing you usually do when you go into the library?

When I first go into the library, to be truthful with you, if it has been a hot day, I go in and cool myself off. I'll use the bathroom if I have to use it. I get some water. I go in and I look through the books, like literature helping you with your grammar and reading and writing skills. They help me with my studies. Before when I was in school, I dropped out of school. When I dropped out of school it was over drug addiction.

What do you use the most in the library?

The card catalog because you have to find out the information you want in there. That alone gives me inspiration because I'm learning about the

information I need to get. Which section I need to go into, and the right section I need to use to help me with my addiction or just life in general. To me, every little aspect of my life is important now, where as before I was living out there like an animal. It was chaos. Now, I've got my life in order. Going to the card catalog is like a discovery. You are discovering things like what you can do and what you need help on, the sections you need to go to. The people there are really helpful. If I get stuck trying to find a specific topic or some literature, right, they (library staff) are willing to help me. They are nice people. In my addiction I did so many people wrong. I did so many people wrong. The people, who I was around, weren't positive people, but now my life has totally changed around. I like dealing with good people, because it makes me happy and it makes me healthy.

Do you use the card catalog on the computer?

I haven't reached the stage where I can use the computer so I just use the card catalog where you can pull out the cards. You have the little cards that tell you where to go with numbers and stuff. It is fun to me because I've got my life back. It takes me back to when I was in school and I would go in the library and use the card catalog. The time from when I started using drugs to now, I've lost that. I can never get that back. It's like I picked up where I left off at. God is granting me grace and he is giving me tools that I can use again. It is beautiful and I love it.

Informant #5

What is the first thing you do when you go into the library?

The first thing I do depends on if I am trying to do something for a job situation then I will probably get somebody to help me on the computer as far as a resume, typing out a letter or faxing something. If not I might go there to use the copy machine to make copies or basically just go to the magazine section to keep up with what is going on in the world with People magazine or Time magazine.

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences in the library?

There is something that I do like about the library, the movie rentals. You don't have to go all outside of town just to find a movie you like. Basically movies you haven't seen in a while, they have them at the library. That is something good I like too. Then they have a kid's part of the library where kids want to go to sit back and enjoy their little world while we enjoy the big part of the library. They also have a spot for the kids.

Do you have children? Do you take them to the library?

Yes, I have kids, but my kids are like older. They have to deal with school, so after school they want to play, so it is hard to get them into the library. They have computers at home, so they would rather be around the house at the computers, maybe play video games.

Interactions with library staff: indicators of service perceptions

Questions regarding the informants' interactions with library staff were asked in order to identify their perceptions of service that they may or many not

receive within the library. In certain instances, questions about encounters with specific library staff members were asked in order to discern incidental interactions from overall perceptions of service. In all instances there was no distinction made among library para-professionals, volunteers or librarians.

Informant #1

Do you ever interact with library staff members, people who work at the library?

From time to time, yes.

How do you feel about the treatment you receive from the librarians? Do you receive good service?

They've been excellent.

When you do ask a librarian for help, what kinds of things do you need them to help you with?

Usually, maybe a particular function at times as it refers to the computer, maybe a book that I may not be able to find.

Basic reference questions?

Yes.

Informant #2

You said you were going to see somebody about helping you to use the computers. Were you going ask a friend to help you or someone who works at the library?

Well my case manager was going to help me learn the basic skills of using the computer. Whenever she has time next week, she was going to take me over there (the library) to train. She is going to show me about the computers, the basic needs of the computer and uses. I mean, because I have always wanted to learn how to run one of those things. Besides the unemployment office, that is all of the skills I have on the computer. Let's face it computers are the future.

Whenever you go into the library, do you ever ask anyone who is working there to help you with anything?

Yeah, there is a little...well she is not a little woman. She is a right tall, brown skinned lady with nice manners and stuff. I ask her where certain books are. She takes me right to them. She takes me to the sections that they are in. The service over there is real good.

Do you always ask her or do you ever ask someone else for help?

Basically, every time I come in there she is working on the shelves. I have gotten to know her so good that I just go to her and say hello. She asks me what I need and then I tell her and she takes me right to where it is at.

You said you like the service you receive there, so you never feel like you are treated unfairly or discriminated against?

No, that is a good library because some people (library staff at other libraries) be like, "Well it is over there on aisle such and such and such..." but this particular woman took me right over to the right section for what I was looking for. When she didn't know she used the computer to find out what section it was in.

They (the library staff from his hometown) would just point to books?

Yes, they would say, "It is over there on aisle such and such..." then they expect you to go do the footwork and go find it. Like I said, since I've been to Durham, the people over here are really nice as far as the library is concerned.

Informant #3**Do you ever ask for help?**

No.

Why not?

Basically, I just do it on my own.

You don't need any help?

It depends on if I can't find something, and that is the only time I would ask.

But nine out of ten times, I always find it.

The times that you have asked for help, were you treated fairly.

Yes.

You like the service you receive there?

Yes, they are quick and they don't hesitate. They talk nice to you.

Do you have any complaints about the library besides the magazines not being updated enough?

Well, a couple of the employees are kind of irritating.

What is irritating about them (the library employees)?

They'll walk around and stare at you like you are crazy. They'll make these little funny faces at you and all these little crazy jives. If they make a mistake and think that they see you doing something wrong, the first thing she will do is

call security on you. If she thinks you are sleeping she will call the security on you.

You are not allowed to sleep?

No, we aren't allowed to sleep or anything like that.

Do the same employees call the security guard all of the time or are different library employees calling the security guard?

It is basically the same people.

You've said the library is a safe, calming place, but you have to watch out or else you'll get kicked out?

Yes that is how it is. If they catch you sleeping or something or if you disrespect the library, they'll kick you out.

What do you mean when you say, 'disrespect the library'?

I mean like if you get too loud or get in an argument with somebody.

Have you had any problems like that there?

No.

Have you observed other people having these problems at the library?

I've seen some.

Like what?

Basically tempers will rise, or people she catches sleeping she will treat like that.

Now does, 'she' only treat people who 'she' thinks are homeless this way or does 'she' treat everyone this way?

The ones that are homeless, I think the ones that are homeless go through this situation the most. Besides that, she doesn't mess with anybody ever.

Informant #4

When you go to the library, do you usually ask someone for help when you need something?

A lot of times when I first started going to the library, I would ask them (library staff). They would not hesitate. They are nice people. A couple of them understand my dyslexia and they told me, "Don't be ashamed," and that they know people that are like that. I'm not the only one. As soon as I opened up I would call on them a lot. At first I was ashamed but now I am not because they are good people and they help me. I'll call on them, I will, especially if I get stuck looking for some literature on a specific topic. I call on them. They are right there for me. A lot of time when I go into the library they call me by my name and they ask me, "Mr. _____, is there anything I can help you with before I go to where I am going."

They know you?

Yeah, it is beautiful. It is wonderful.

You are there a lot?

Yes, I'm there, the library helps me a lot in my speech and everything, as far as my grammar, my writing skills, my reading skills.

When you ask for help at the library, do you always receive good service?

Always good, those people respect me. They see that I am trying to enrich my life. I am doing the best I can to be a productive member of society again. It

makes me feel good and it uplifts my self-esteem. It is wonderful. It is beautiful. They are good people.

Do you feel welcomed at this library?

Yeah. Yeah.

Has this been your experience at all of the libraries you have used?

Basically, this library here is more for people, real people as far as your needs and as far as finding different type of literature, tapes or books. These people care. To me they care. They care about you getting what you need as far as the literature or the tape or to use the computer even though I haven't gotten to that part yet. I notice people who come in to use the computer and they (the library staff) are right there for you, just like reading a book, they will help you.

Informant #5

Do you ask someone for help?

Basically, I would ask someone for help. Basically I really just started going back to the library and I am not too familiar with all of the things. It has been like some years since I went. I would ask someone to guide to me to like maybe a book I want to read like a mystery or suspense (novel). Instead of just spending time looking for it, I would ask someone to help me.

Do you have a library staff member that you ask to help you all of the time or do you just ask anybody?

Anybody that is just working there.

Do you feel like you always receive good service?

Yes, I think there is nice hospitality as far as the library is concerned.

Have you ever had any negative experiences at the library?

No, I can't say that I have.

Indicators of lifelong use

Some of the informants would describe the Durham public library that they currently use, in comparison with libraries that they frequented in the past. This led me to ask if they used libraries as children. I wanted to see if the library had been a constant presence in their lives. Most of the informants did indicate that they had gone to libraries as children.

Informant #1

Have you been a life long user of the library? Have you used the library since you were a small child?

Since I was a lad.

Informant #3

Did you use the library as a child?

Yeah.

Have you been a life long user of the library?

Yeah, my parents made me go to the library when reports were due and things like that.

You kept going?

Yeah.

Informant #4

How old were you when you dropped out of school?

I was seventeen. Sixteen, seventeen.

How many years ago was that?

I'm forty-two, so it has been about maybe about twenty-five, twenty-seven years ago.

Did you use the library before you dropped out of school?

I stayed in the library. Because I had a learning disorder, but then they didn't know that it was dyslexia. They thought I was retarded. I used to go to the library because I knew that there was something in me. I could grasp and study information, but then I started getting in to drugs. Plus I was an athlete and once I got into drugs, everything went to the side. I dropped out of school.

Informant #5

You said that you just started going back to the library, did you use the library when you were younger, as a child?

As far as high school like they do essays, or researches or book study or any assignments that have to do with sitting down and reading and focusing. I would always use the library, just for a peace of mind. It is easy to be distracted if you are at home with the phone ringing and somebody is calling your name. I would basically go to the library just to have a peace of mind and really focus.

Coping with Drug Addiction

Because all of the informants were participating in a drug rehabilitation program within the shelter, they all openly discussed their addictions to

narcotics. It became obvious that some of the informants saw the library as a type of haven from the outside environment in which drugs are readily available. In the following interview excerpts, the informants describe the role of the library in their lives as recovering drug addicts.

Informant #1

I was in a vicious cycle really, because I was here (at the homeless shelter) as a direct result of using drugs. During the period of a few years, it has just been a cycle for me in which I would go out and come back. I would come in here after having been drugged out there in the streets, and I would get myself back together and you know, I would get a job and repeat the same insanity and end up back here. Finally I made a decision to do something different with more consistency.

Has there been a good support network here, with the addicts who have been working on their addictions within the shelter? Has it helped you to stay clean?

Amongst my group (addiction support group in the shelter)?

Yes.

Yeah, it has been great. It has been an experience. You are in a group with people from different walks in life. You are in a group with people who have some experience with recovery, like I did, and you have some people who are there for the very first time. You have a range of people, some come and stay and some come and go. Even outside of our immediate group there are a lot of

support programs by way of meetings within the immediate area that we frequent during the week. It is a good thing. It has been a good experience.

To tie this back to the library, do you find anything in the library that helps you deal with your life as a person who is in recovery?

No, not really. Usually when I go over there it is for pure personal enjoyment and job stuff, nothing therapeutic (in the library), because we use texts within the group (addiction support group). But you can find information about the disease of addiction and you may be able to find some recovery stuff in there. But mostly in the libraries they usually have information that talks mainly about the disease of addiction. But there is a lot of information especially now that we are in the computer age and the Internet is there. The only thing I dislike about that is that they usually don't have enough computers and you have a time limit. You have like a thirty-minute time limit.

Informant #2

How long ago were you diagnosed (as HIV positive)?

Oh, it has been two years, but like I said, I used (drugs) for two solid straight years after finding out. I've been back here (at the Urban Ministries shelter) for three months now and I have been in this (rehabilitation) program for three months. I am trying to find out everything and do positive things with my time instead of sitting around thinking, being bored. I am always doing something positive. Because when I get bored...boy...I am in bad shape then. I try go to the library. When my brother-in-law has time, I call him up and we go fishing, or something like that. Those are about the two only things I really do. I go to

the library and I fish. Durham doesn't have too many places that I want to go. I mean, besides the mall. I can go to plenty of places, but if I feel like I am not going to be safe, I try not to get myself in situations like that. It is best to go to positive places

What do you mean by unsafe places?

Unsafe? Places like the basketball court, anywhere negativity is at I try to avoid those places. Because if you go to the basketball court people who are playing ball have alcohol out there, and I am trying not to be around stuff like that. Even though they drink all around here (Urban Ministries shelter) and get high all around here (Urban Ministries shelter), I try to keep myself in a safe environment.

Do you see the library as a place where you can stay clean? There are not a lot of bad influences?

No, they have plenty of good security. I haven't seen anybody go over there and raise a ruckus. It is a nice decent environment for somebody who is trying to get a little peace of mind at that present time. It is nice. I mean really, my hometown had a library that was like a cemetery or a funeral home in there. The people weren't helpful there. Let's face it they (the library staff from his home town) just would say, "It is over there..." and they didn't want to help you out all.

Informant #4

Have you been struggling with your addiction, off and on, for the past twenty years?

Off and on for about the past twenty-three years. I have been on many different programs but this is the only program that has really helped me with my addiction as far as learning about the different aspects of staying clean. Being an addict is something like a disease, it is something I will live with for the rest of my life. It can't be arrested. The first thing we learn is not to pick up the drug. These other aspects of our lives we have to learn all over again, like a little kid learning to crawl before he walks. So, I got my life back. I got my brothers and sisters back in my life. This program has been very helpful to me, as far as living life on life's terms.

Going back to the library.

OK.

Does the library have information that may help you cope with your addiction?

Yeah, the drugs are a small aspect of our addiction. In my addiction I had character defects. People that use drugs have character defects; people that don't use drugs have character defects. That is the nature of a person's life. When I go to the library I learn about life in general. Outside of the reading and writing skills and the grammar, I look for books on life, basic life. I learn other things. Libraries open up a whole new world to me. I take pride in what I say to people, my grammar, because I use to have a really nasty tongue and disposition. I used to use real nasty words or curse words. Now I've learned that I don't have to use those words. I can be a decent, pleasant person. The library helps me with my life. It gives me a whole new perspective. Basically,

to the ordinary person it is not new, but to me it is new. I take pride in what I wear. I take pride when I get up, and I use the facilities (Urban Ministries shelter) to take a shower, (I take pride in) my conduct, my morals and principles in life. The library is a big part of it. That is what I feel really.

Informant #5

Are you a part of the rehabilitation program here?

Yes.

Does the library have any information that will help you with your rehabilitation program?

Not unless you are trying to find a book about the specific type of drug that you are using. Yeah but they are there.

Have you looked for these books at the library?

No, I have not.

Have you ever considered the library to be source of information about addiction?

Yeah, I have but due to the point that we do so much in class (rehabilitation class), I get a lot of that in here. There is a lot of pressure out there in the streets. If someone is going through stress or any family problems, if you just want to go somewhere and just relax, the library is a good place.

Sanctuary: the library as a safe place

Some informants described the library as a place in addition to the Durham Urban Ministries shelter that they could receive shelter. Other

informants professed that the library is a place of tranquility and safety, a sort of refuge from the sometimes harsh outside world. The following interview excerpts relay this sense of peace that some of the informants find in the library.

Informant #1

Why do you think that it (the library) is one of the places that homeless people frequent a lot?

Well, it is a public building for one thing and therefore you can't discriminate. It is shelter and there is warmth and there is cool there. You go there for those reasons I myself am one of those people. Homeless people, we are people from all walks of life. I was a college graduate and did a year of graduate school, but I had a drug problem. You can be smart, as you want to be, or as well educated, as you want. When it came to drugs, I had no common sense. I deal with a disease. Thank god that now that I am dealing with it I am living somewhat of a normal life now. I am beginning again to add substance again to my life. I am beginning to take up old habits that enjoyed a lifetime ago. I'm thinking about going back to school again. I think I'd really need to do that in order for me to be where I want to be eventually. But you know, one thing at a time and that is just keeping it real. But it always does me good to keep my skills up to par. I always found enjoyment, even as a boy, in reading and learning. I never lost my yen for that.

Informant #3

Why do you spend so much time in the library? Four hours a day is a lot of time.

Well, for one I am homeless, OK. It's hard, and I get tired of being out here in the streets. I try to figure out something to do with my time until I can find me a job. And that (going to the library) is something for me to do.

Do you think the library is a safe place?

It is a nice place to be at, instead of being in the street all day. Dealing with these people in the street is kind of hard. The library lets you relax your mind, a calming place.

Informant #5

Do you use the library for anything else?

No, just an atmosphere for peace of mind, to meditate and just find my inner thoughts.

Is the public library across the street the only library that you have used in the city?

Yes.

Is that because this one is within walking distance?

Yes. Everything is near this library. There is a park down street. You can handle your bills downtown. There are places to eat downtown. After that you can go to the library to relax.

The library as a learning environment

Many of the informants described the library as a place in which they could continue their education by acquiring knowledge pertinent to their lives. There are also incidents in which the library is criticized for not fulfilling its potential as an environment of learning. The following excerpts impart the informants' perspectives of learning in the library.

Informant #1

Is there anything you would like to add about your experience as a library user?

It is very important to read. It is very important to be informed. It is very important to know that the library is there. It is there for that purpose. It has been one of the places that homeless people frequent on a regular basis. They go there for many reasons, but at some point they find themselves picking up a book.

So you would like it if there were more computers or more time?

Yeah, if you had more computers you can help a lot more people. A lot more people would have access to them and have more time, I would assume, because there are a lot of people who come over to use the computers. That is a really good thing, because as a direct result of them having the Internet there, you have a lot of people, believe it or not, who are no longer computer-illiterate. They are coming over there on a regular basis working on the computers and learning by default. It is a good thing, a really good thing.

Informant #2

Do you want to learn to use the computers more?

Yeah.

Is there anything you would like to tell me about your experience using the library?

Basically, everyone who goes in there is trying to learn something. Whenever I go in there, everyone has a book. They are doing something. Their purpose for being in there, I couldn't tell you one way or the other, but when I walk in there, everyone has a book or are doing something with the computers. They are writing, doing little essays or something. The library has a good environment as far as I have seen. I guess there are bad places and bad people everywhere you go, but I try to look at the positive people in the world, not the bad ones. That is how I think. They (people) have to be where they are at. But like I said, as far as the library is concerned, everyone I see has something in their hands. They are doing something. Even down to the people on the streets, they are even reading magazines and stuff they can understand. The library has something for everybody, I guess.

Seriously, we could walk over there right now and see. You might see some homeless people or street people up in there (the library), they aren't looking their best. But they are trying to expand their minds by just sitting there reading something. Instead of being out on the street and panhandling or whatever at least they are sitting there trying to learn something or attempting to.

Informant #3

Is there anything you would like to say about your experience using the library?

Well basically, I wish they would get a GED class going over there, something to help people. It would be useful. Like classes to help people learn to get their GED or whatever. Basically, you are helping yourself. I don't see any activities they are doing over there to try and help anybody, to be a public library.

Informant #4

How does the library help you with those (grammar) skills?

It gives me basic tools like nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs and conjunctions. Basic little things like that, right. It is fun for me again, different topics like a refresher in math or language arts or basic things like reading skills and writing skills. See I like geography. I am an artist. I did the artwork on these walls. I am an artist. The geography helps me with that. I like to know about places, different places and different parts of the world. It helps me because I am an artist and I have to have a picture in my mind. It is easy to look at the TV and you see a different place, but to look in a book or to read about somebody's story from a different place gives me a picture in my mind. The literature and things in the library gives me that. If I put more emphasis on things, I get something out. Instead of watching something on the TV, I can read about it and have a picture in my own mind. I have a grasp on it.

Is there anything you would like to add concerning your experience as a library user?

I've got a library card and I honor it. The people at the library are a great asset to this community. They are good people and they care. It is like a new world to me. It has opened up other worlds to me. Since I have a reading or learning disorder, it helps me to grasp reality. If there is anything else, I can't think of it.

Analysis

All five informants have unique life experiences that have led them to become both homeless and library users. Because of their diverse perspectives of the public library, even if more data from additional informants were gathered, it would be very difficult to generalize their experiences as homeless library users. Like all individuals, homeless library users cannot be characterized by one descriptor alone.

At the time of the interview, Informant #2 had resided at the Durham Urban Ministries shelter longer than any of the other participants. He said that he had been affiliated with the shelter for almost eight months. Informant #5 had resided at the shelter for the shortest period of time. He stated that he had been affiliated with the shelter for almost three weeks. The average rate of current Durham Urban Ministries shelter residency for all five informants was four months and one week. Two of the five informants indicated that they had resided at other homeless shelters before Durham Urban Ministries and one Informant implied that he had been a resident of Durham Urban Ministries prior to his current stay there. From this data, it would seem that the participant

group included people who have resided in homeless shelters for both limited and lengthy periods of time.

The participants varied in frequency of library use. Because of the high degree of variance, the average frequency of library use is hardly relevant. It is interesting to note that all of the informants except for Informant #5 went to the library either every day or more days out of the week than they did not. The following table shows their described use of the library.

Participants	Days Per Week	Average Length of Visit	Days Since Last Visit
Informant #1	7	2 hours	1
Informant #2	4	2 hours and 30 minutes	7
Informant #3	7	4 hours	1
Informant #4	4	2 hours and 30 minutes	3
Informant #5	2	30 minutes	4
Averages	4.8	2 hours 20minutes	3.8

Two informants indicated that the close proximity of the library to the homeless shelter increased their frequency of use. Informant #5 visited the library the least and also spent the least time there. Informant #3 spent the most time at the library and visited frequently. From this small sample pool of homeless library users, it can be concluded that these participants say that they are at the library almost every day of the week for several hours each day.

In their own words, three out of five of the informants reported that they seek information regarding employment and housing in the library. Every informant said that he used the library to read for leisure and general research.

They spend time locating library material by using the card catalog, browsing the collection or asking a library staff member for help. Two informants said that the library was a place in which they kept up with the news. One informant surfs the Internet and another reads periodicals to acquire knowledge of current events. One participant said that he was using the computers in the library to make a resume. This same participant said that he liked to rent videotapes from the library. I didn't ask him where he views these videotapes. When compiling the informants' self described actions it would seem that in many ways their actions in the library are like those of any patron who uses the library.

Three of the informants indicated that they use the library for shelter. Indications of this were apparent when the informants said that they went to the library because it is always open to the public, it provides cool and warmth, and it is a place to get a drink of water and a place to relax. One informant implied that he is sometimes caught sleeping in the library.

From the informants' perspectives, they use the library for the same reasons that anyone would use the library. What separates them from other groups of library users may be the frequency in which they participate in these activities in the library on a weekly basis. Most of the participants have said that they are in the library almost every day of every week, and on average they are passing a couple of hours there during each visit. This frequency combined with their described activity in the library would mean that some

library staff see the same informants come in and get water, go to the bathroom and ask for help almost everyday.

To capture how the informants felt about the service they received, they were asked about their interactions with library staff members. Almost all of them said that they had asked a library staff member for help at one time or another. All informants except Informant #3 had positive experiences with library staff. Informant #3, relayed that certain library staff members harassed homeless library patrons by staring at them like they were, "crazy." Informant #3 also indicated that these same staff members would call security and have homeless people escorted outside of the building if they were caught sleeping or disturbing other library users by arguing or fighting.

This same informant had a very negative view of the library in general. In spite of the fact that he says he goes to the library every day, he complained about poor service, un-rotated periodicals and a library that doesn't do anything for the public like start a GED class. While in the small participant pool of five informants, Informant #3's reaction to library staff is an anomaly, more informants would have to be interviewed in order to determine if he is truly alone in his perception of harassment in the library. From his evasive behavior during the interview and his own description of people who, "disrespect the library," it could be determined that he himself participates in this behavior and is therefore reprimanded by library staff.

In contrast to Informant #3's perspective of library service, the other four informants felt that they received excellent service at the public library.

Informant #4 described the staff as kind and compassionate. He talked about how the library employees helped him not to be ashamed of his dyslexia and he said that they respected him. Informant #4 seemed to view his relationship with the library employees as a source of pride and self-esteem. He described incidents where they would help him without solicitation, and knew him by name.

Informant #2 echoed these sentiments, by describing how one particular library staff member would always walk him to the library material he needed. He contrasted this staff member's behavior with that of library staff from another library where they would point to the library material and would not walk him to it. He appreciated the service he said he receives daily at his current public library. From the informants' responses, it can be concluded that most of them believe that they welcome at this public library. This feeling of acceptance encourages them to ask for help when they need something and can play a power role of encouragement and support in their lives.

There is some evidence that the current relationship that the informants have with the library, stems from positive experiences that they had with the library earlier in their lives. Some of the informants indicated that they had used the library as children. Indicators of lifelong use always centered around school, in which informants used the library to study for classes, write reports or to concentrate on an assignment.

In contrast to using the library for school related assignments in the past, some informants indicated that presently the library was also used to combat

drug use. While most of the informants said that the library collection held nothing to help them stay clean, some informants said that because the library is free from the pressure to use drugs that they encountered on the streets, that it was an agent of sobriety in their lives. The library was referred to as a, “safe place,” in contrast to the basketball court or the streets, which were referred to as, “negative places.” One reason given for the perceived safety in the library was that it had good security. This security prevents drug dealers from using the library as a place to exchange money for drugs. While in the library, the informants take respite from the peer pressures on the streets in which drug use can be encouraged.

Not only did the security of the library provide the informants with a drug free environment, it also created a peaceful space in which the informants could relax from the tensions of daily life. The library has been described as a sanctuary in the past (Cart, 1992). Some of the informants echoed this sentiment by describing the library as having “an atmosphere of peace” and by calling it “a good place to relax.” In addition to library security, some of the reasons given for this calming atmosphere included the shelter that the library provided, that it is not a place of discrimination and that it is free from distractions. Because many of the informants indicated that the lives that they lead outside of the library is very chaotic without homes and other basic necessity, in contrast the library is reliable and safe.

It is only within this atmosphere of perceived peace that many of the informants find opportunities to learn. The informants spoke of the importance

of reading. All of the informants said that they read in the library. Some of the informants described other homeless people in addition to themselves, who would use the public library to read and to learn. Informant #4 in great detail described how the act of reading stories both increased his knowledge of the world and as an artist, enriched his visual imagination. Only one informant, Informant #3, criticized the public library for not doing enough to facilitate learning. He felt as though the library needed to provide classes for its users. Unlike this informant, Informant #1 took a more proactive stance in which he described the process of learning to use the computer simply because it was available to him at the library. Like Informant #1, Informant #2 planned to use the resources at the library to learn to use the computer with his caseworker (social worker) as an instructor. These instances of perceived learning opportunities in the library, lead me to conclude that most of the informants use the library to gain knowledge of many topics. In many ways, the library may appeal to the informants more than the classroom as a learning environment. Because of their unique circumstances such as being homeless, having learning disorders and in one instance, suffering from a life threatening illness, the open learning space available in the library may be more effectual than a traditional classroom setting.

Conclusion

It is important to reiterate that the purpose of this paper is to investigate what activities some homeless people who use public libraries engage in while

in the library and to evaluate how satisfied these people are with the service they receive in public libraries. This paper has fulfilled its purpose by recording and analyzing the responses of five homeless library users who discussed both their library activities and their levels of satisfaction with a public library. From their perspective, the five informants described their experiences as library users.

Having obtained five homeless peoples' perspectives of a public library does not equate to having a profile of all public library interactions with homeless people. These data are quite limited and brief; deeper studies would provide more confident generalizations. Five peoples' perceptions of the public library are just that, perceptions. These perceptions may or may not be accurate or fair, but they do tell us something. Regardless of their validity, such perceptions are powerful agents of influence in the lives of both library users and library workers. For many years, librarians have spoken to each other about what they believe homeless people are doing, wanting and feeling within the walls of the library. This paper provides five voices a platform with which they get to talk back to us and to let us know what role we may play in the entirety of their lives, not just the role we play as information acquirers, disseminators and organizers.

It is most important to note that while many librarians may perceive homeless library users to be problem patrons, that homeless library users do not perceive themselves that way. They see themselves as individuals who enter the library to exploit all it has to offer such as information, tranquility and

shelter. “Problem patron” is a librarian’s category, and a negative classification. The use of the library as shelter creates conflict for libraries because library staff have not been trained to care for the homeless, libraries do not receive funding to facilitate the needs of homeless people nor are libraries recognized for the role they play in the lives of people who do not have homes. While librarians are trained to manage information organizations, it cannot be assumed that our organizations are not affected by the economy, society and politics. As our users are influenced by all of these things, so are our organizations as we labor to meet the needs of these users, including those without homes.

Not all homeless library users are recognizably homeless. Some homeless people who enter the library, will never be known as homeless to library employees. This study has shown that homeless people can also be artists, readers, and job seekers. When working with homeless library users, librarians must recognize that not having a home is one important aspect of their lives, but it does not sum up the totality of their needs. It is important for librarians to communicate with local homeless shelters in their area; to better determine the role that their library may or may not be playing in their homeless users’ lives.

Further Research

More research in the area of homeless library users could benefit both library users and librarians. A future study should include more interviews with a bigger pool of homeless participants coupled with similar interviews with

library staff. By comparing library employee perceptions with those of homeless library users, a greater cross-group awareness can be achieved.

Appendix A: Participant Handout



THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
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April 19, 2002

PERSPECTIVES ON THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Study Introduction:

- I would like for you to be in a research study about perspectives on the public library.
- My name is Aisha Harvey and I am a Masters of library science student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I am conducting this study. Professor David Carr at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill is the study advisor.

Purpose:

- I plan to use this study is to both identify activities that library users participate in while in the public library and to explore evaluations of public library service of library users who are currently homeless.
- I hope that information obtained from this study's interviews can be used to help librarians better serve homeless library users in the future.

What Will Happen in the Study:

- You will be asked to participate in an interview as part of this study.

- The interview questions are designed to: find out what activities you participate in while at the public library and to find out if you receive good service at the public library.
- The interview will take approximately thirty minutes.
- The interview will be recorded with a micro-cassette recorder.

If you have any questions or concerns about being in this study, you should contact Aisha Harvey by email at harva@ils.unc.edu, or David Carr at (919) 962-8364, email address: carr@ils.unc.edu.

Your Privacy is Important:

- We will make every effort to protect your privacy.
- We will not use your name in any written reports.
- No one other than the researcher will hear the tapes. The tapes will be destroyed when the project is done.

Risks and Discomforts:

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this study.

Your Rights:

- You decide on your own whether or not you want to be in this research project.
- You will not be treated any differently if you decide not to be in this research project.
- If you decide to be in the research project, you will have the right to stop being in the research project at any time or to not answer any questions that you do not want to answer.

Honorarium:

- You will receive an honorarium payment of no less and no more than \$10.00 after the interview.

- The \$10.00 is yours to keep regardless of how many questions you answer and how long the interview lasts.

Institutional Review Board Approval:

- The Academic Affairs Institutional Review Board (AA-IRB) of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has approved this study.
- If you have any concerns about your rights in this study you may contact AA-IRB at 919-962-7761 or aa-irb@unc.edu.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

To Establish Interview Eligibility

(First, homeless care facilitator must identify interviewee as someone who uses the homeless shelter)

Do you go to the public library? Why?_____ (Any other reasons?)____(Any more reasons you use the library?)

Which public library do you go to?

Do you go to this library every day (If, no: How often? If yes: Why do you go everyday?)

How many days a week do you come to the public library?

How much time on average do you spend in the public library?

To Determine Library Activity

What is the first thing you do on entering the library?

When you are in the library, where do you go?

What do you use in the library?

Do you look at magazines? What kind?

Do you look at newspapers? What kind?

Do you read books? What kind?

Do you use the computers? If so, how long do you use them?

Are there other things that you do in library? If so, what do you do?

What places in the library do you use the most?

Do you ask the librarian for help?

To Determine Perceptions of the Library

Overall, do you feel that you are welcome or unwelcome at this library?

Please explain your answer.

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The 12 federal agency sponsors include the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, Veterans Affairs, Agriculture, Commerce, Education, Energy, Justice, Labor, and Transportation as well as the Social Security Administration and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

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