

Research Proposal Component #1

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Libraries have a lot to offer their communities, and while the predominant understanding may be that people patronize them for their repository of books and other materials, there are many who view the library as a valuable resource in terms of locating and navigating social services relating to: employment, mental health, domestic violence, homelessness, substance abuse, and much more (Luo et al., 2017).

While many librarians are advocates for people experiencing the aforementioned disadvantages in their communities, they often lack the training, knowledge, and resources to provide adequate assistance (Aykanian et al., 2020). Furthermore, evidence taken from *Social Work in Australian Public Libraries: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Social Justice* asserts that “public library staff experience feeling overwhelmed and anxious when working with this community, often wanting to help but not knowing where the boundary between providing support and undermining the self-determination of the individual lies, and not knowing what resources and services would best meet the needs of these visitors” (Garner et al., 2021, p. 504). As a result, many public libraries have begun employing social workers who can provide assistance to members of the community who are not having their needs met.

To take a closer look at a particular subgroup within disadvantaged communities - people experiencing homelessness often see public libraries as both a source of information and shelter. This has created the need for librarians to provide services beyond their training and education, and thus, resulted in the need for social workers’ presence in the library. Many studies have been conducted and their results determined the need for libraries to add outreach programs that serve the homeless population, to add social workers to their staff, or to train library staff on the basics of social work. Current research so far has primarily focused on how the library adapts to the

requirements of social work, instead of focusing on understanding the point of view of these patrons using the library as a mean to meet their needs in terms of social services.

While the body of literature on people experiencing social disadvantages and their connection to public libraries continues to grow, most of the data is anecdotal and few studies have used rigorous empirical approaches (Anderson et al., 2012). Small scale qualitative research has been made in the subject, indicating that libraries that provide outreach programs tailored to the specific needs of patrons experiencing homelessness can provide this demographic a sense of belonging and inclusion (Hodgetts et al., 2008; Willett and Broadley, 2011). In a quantitative study focused on patrons experiencing homelessness, the researchers found that librarians were aware of the acute challenges experienced by patrons in this socio-demographic bracket, yet many lacked professional guidance on how to help. The librarians in the study advocated for additional training on helping these patrons (Gieskes, 2009).

San Francisco Public Library was the first library to hire a social worker (Gross & Latham, 2021). This took place in 2009, and since then, many other libraries have begun employing social workers. Since this is still a relatively recent trend, it remains unclear whether having social workers in libraries is the best way to provide help to patrons and library staff. There are many people who believe that librarians can and should adopt social work approaches when working with patrons, and others who do not agree that this level of work should fall on librarians who have not received proper training. Many libraries are against hiring social workers simply for budgetary reasons (Gross & Latham, 2021). This paper will analyze the impact of having social workers in libraries and approach the topic from various stakeholder perspectives.

With any program or service put in place in a library, it is important to evaluate the impact it has on library stakeholders. Since in-library social workers and related programs are

still relatively new, studies and literature thus far have largely focused on what social workers can provide for libraries, or perceptions before having social programs put in place (Schweizer, 2018). Similarly, studies focus on how these programs are perceived by social workers and librarians. Little has been done, however, to gather perceptions of patrons within communities that have access to these programs. Now that there are more public libraries with in-library social workers, there are more opportunities to evaluate the impacts these programs have had within their communities. This research study employs a mixed methods approach to investigate the perceptions of patrons who have utilized the services of in-library social workers, as well as those who have not. Along with perceptions, patrons will be asked if they are aware of social programs available through the library. Investigation into these perceptions will help librarians understand gaps or barriers in user-access to these services, as well as whether keeping these in-library social worker positions and corresponding programs in place within libraries is viewed as beneficial to the communities they aim to serve.

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