

Crime and Disruption in North Carolina Libraries

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The United States has one of the highest crime rates of any industrialized nation. We experience high levels of crime in the private sector (between friends, acquaintances, and family members), and we also experience high levels of crime in the public sector (against commercial establishments, in schools, parks, etc.). In addition, our crime rates have been increasing in recent years. It is likely that public libraries are no longer immune from these crime patterns. In fact, libraries probably reflect much of the crime found in the surrounding community.

The types of crime that affect libraries vary. Book theft is a significant and costly problem. Many libraries have had problems with the mutilation of books and periodicals (4,8). Sometimes these acts are done for profit, but other times for the convenience of the patron. Vandalism is one of the more common types of disruptive behaviors. Episodes range from ice cream in the book drops, to spray painting walls, to full scale destruction of windows, equipment, and materials (2,8,9). Arson and attempted arson are not unknown and can have a devastating effect on the physical property as well as the budget (1,9).

In addition to crimes directed against property there may be other acts focused against persons. Once again, the severity of the episodes varies. At one extreme we know of many cases of verbal abuse (5,6). However, the problems can include assault and robbery both inside the library and on the surrounding walkways and parking lots (6,7).

The actual occurrence or the fear of crime can have long-lasting effects on the behavior of both staff and patrons. When studying the effects of crime we should consider two types of costs, direct and indirect. Direct costs are those

that are the actual result of the specific offense. For example, this would include the actual losses, replacement costs, and the costs of any injuries.

Just as important to examine, but more difficult to assess are the indirect costs. They may in reality have greater impact on the institution and be more widespread. For the individual staff member or patron the indirect costs may be more traumatic and long lasting than direct costs. Indirect costs are the reactions to crime. That is, reactions to past or anticipated crime. Increased or new security measures are indirect costs. Changing or limiting open hours because of crime patterns are indirect costs. Any behavior changes made by staff or patron due to crime can be considered indirect costs—including not using the library.

Our series of state studies on crime and disruption are designed to obtain information not only on the patterns of crime that occur in libraries but also on the costs involved. Hopefully, identifying these previously little known patterns will aid in prevention and elimination of the problems.

Procedure

Sample. North Carolina was one of thirteen states selected for study in the current series of surveys. A systematic sample of sixty public libraries were drawn for each state. From the comprehensive listing of all public libraries in the *American Library Directory*, every "nth" library was selected. The ratio was determined by dividing the total number of public libraries by sixty. For example, if a state had 120 public libraries, then every second library in the listing was included in the sample. In this way a representative sample for each state was obtained.

Materials. An explanatory cover letter, the survey instrument, and a non-stamped return envelope were sent to the head librarian in each of the sampled libraries during October, 1981. The survey instrument was comprised of a four page, 68 item questionnaire. The items were

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developed following a review of current literature related to both library science and criminal victimization of other public institutions. Questions covered topics including: (1) characteristics of the library, (2) characteristics of the community, (3) patron use patterns, (4) experiences with 18 different types of crimes, (5) direct and indirect costs of crime, (6) use of security equipment and procedures, and so on. All items were fixed alternative questions constructed to obtain "computer ready" responses. The survey was designed so that the identity of the library would not be known unless the respondent chose to reveal it. Returned surveys were coded and the data keypunched in preparation for analysis.

Results

The systematic sampling of 60 North Carolina libraries resulted in a return of 29 questionnaires to date. This is an average return for mailed victimization surveys of this type. All of the data analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. In this report we will present data describing the frequency of 18 different types of crime and disruption. In addition, summary indices were computed and these data will be presented.

The findings related to patterns of victimization are presented in Table 1. The crimes

described fall into six general categories: (1) vandalism/damage, comprised of items A,F, G,H,I,J; (2) theft, items B,C,D,E; (3) drug offenses, K and L; (4) indecent exposure, O; (5) arson, R; and (6) assault, P and Q. Two items (M and N) asked about verbal abuse of the staff and patrons.

Table 1 describes how often (using five categories of frequencies) each of the acts occurred in the previous 12 months in our sample of North Carolina libraries. The following description of the findings will be limited to the percentage of libraries reporting at least one episode of each act, six or more occurrences of each act, and the summary index for the type of offense. We consider six or more repetitions of the same act to be a chronic problem deserving special attention.

The most common type of vandalism/damage was intentional book damage. Seventy-one per cent of responding librarians were aware of at least one such episode, while 30% had six or more occurrences. Vandalism outside the building was reported in 54% of the cases. Inside vandalism was found in over 60% of the libraries but was chronic in only 15%. Vandalism of cars belonging to the staff and patrons occurred less often than building vandalism. However, approximately one-fourth of the libraries were aware of a patron's

TABLE 1
Percentage of Public Libraries Reporting Disruptive Episodes For A Twelve Month Period.

TYPE OF EPISODE	NUMBER OF EPISODES				
	0	1-2	3-5	6-10	CVEE 10
A. Intentional Book Damage	29	21	21	13	17
B. Book Theft	12	08	08	16	56
C. Reference Material Stolen	31	23	19	12	15
D. Equipment Stolen	67	26	04	00	04
E. Other Theft	70	20	05	05	00
F. Vandalism Outside Building	46	29	18	07	00
G. Vandalism Inside Building	37	33	15	15	00
H. Vandalism of Patron's Car	73	15	08	04	00
I. Vandalism of Staff Car	68	16	08	04	04
J. Vandalism of Equipment	80	12	08	00	00
K. Drug Use By Staff/Patron	62	23	08	04	00
L. Drug Sale By Staff/Patron	100	00	00	00	00
M. Verbal Abuse To Patron	70	15	07	04	04
N. Verbal Abuse To Staff	52	22	19	04	04
O. Indecent Exposure	74	15	07	04	00
P. Assault On Patron	93	04	04	00	00
Q. Assault On Staff	96	00	04	00	00
R. Arson	93	07	00	00	00

car being vandalized while nearly a third reported vandalism to a staff car. The summary index of vandalism that includes all of the related items shows that 82% of responding libraries reported at least one act of some kind of vandalism.

Examination of the items related to theft show that book theft was the most frequent and consistent problem that we measured. Over 85% of the returns indicated at least one episode, and 72% reported over six episodes. The theft of reference material occurred in 69% of the libraries and was a chronic problem in 27%. Other thefts were reported by nearly a third of our sample. Theft of equipment was also found in one-third of our responses. The theft index shows that 3/4 of the responding libraries reported at least one theft.

The use and sale of drugs in the library was less common than either theft or vandalism. Nearly 40% were aware of drug use by the staff or patrons. However, there were no reports of drug sales. Indecent exposure was reported by 26% of the respondents, but was rarely chronic. Episodes of exposure (and other types of crimes) are not always brought to the attention of the staff. We suspect that many of our estimates of crime are conservative. Many episodes go undetected and some known episodes may not be reported to us.

Verbal abuse to the staff was reported to be a problem in nearly a half of the libraries. In contrast, verbal abuse of a patron was noticed in only 30% of the cases. We also computed a total index which describes how often any of the types of crime and disruption occurred. Only 13% of the libraries responding to our survey were free of all acts that we asked about.

Compared with the other twelve states in this portion of the library crime project, the participating North Carolina libraries experienced average amounts of theft, verbal abuse, and assault. The rates of drug problems and vandalism were higher than average. The overall measure of crime and disruption was slightly higher than the average found for the full sampling of states. These state level comparisons must be viewed cautiously since these data have not been controlled for factors that affect the crime rate. Crime rates are influenced not only by the state of location, but also by factors such as city size, use of security, and the characteristics of the community and neighborhood in which the library is located.

Identification of the patterns of crime and disruption can be the first step in developing

programs to minimize the problems. These programs can be implemented in many cases with the support of the staff and public and at low cost to the institution.

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