

Policing and Carcerality in Public Libraries

Sean Gleason¹, Ash Ridsdale², Monica Maddaford³, & Alyssa De'Ath⁴

¹School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta, sgleason@ualberta.ca

²School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta, risdal1@ualberta.ca

³School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta, maddafor@ualberta.ca

⁴School of Library and Information Studies, University of Alberta, aldeath@ualberta.ca

To Cite: Gleason, S., Ridsdale, A., Maddaford, M., & De'Ath, A. (2025). Policing and Carcerality in Public Libraries. *Pathfinder: A Canadian Journal for Information Science Students and Early Career Professionals*, 5(1), 177-182.

<https://doi.org/10.29173/pathfinder100>

Abstract

Policing in libraries poses a significant barrier to access for many potential patrons—and yet, much of the literature on library security advocates for strong security measures without regard for the safety and well-being of patrons and staff belonging to marginalized communities. Considerable lived experience and research shows that police disproportionately target those whose identities deviate from the norm. Thus, in a society with so many diverse experiences, identities, and relationships to power and authority, we are obligated as socially conscious library workers to consider how our relationships to policing and security in the library affect all peoples. To do so, we draw on an intersectional abolitionist praxis that seeks to deconstruct the carceral and penal systems omnipresent in our society. After exploring some of the security measures taken by public libraries that enable the carceral state, we propose alternative measures that can be taken through the acronym-based catchphrase “Before You Call the Cops, Drop a DEUCE!” to encourage library workers of all types to give greater consideration to the ramifications of involving police in difficult patron interactions.

Keywords: Policing, Carceral care, Public libraries, Security, Marginalized peoples

People belonging to marginalized identities have long shared their experiences of being disproportionately targeted by police in all spheres of life. In addition, a growing body of research illustrates the ways in which police enforce hegemonic norms on marginalized people—such as teaching queer youth to appear less queer (Dwyer, 2015)—and interact with greater aggression with certain marginalized groups—such as people with mental illness, who police perceive as dangerous (Watson et al., 2004).

Unfortunately, as libraries do not exist in a vacuum these same realities for queer, disabled, unhoused, racialized, or otherwise marginalized people exist within the hallowed halls of these institutions. Nevertheless, much of the existing literature on library security advocates for the tightening of security measures, often without consideration of the impacts of such measures on the safety and well-being of patrons and staff for whom the police might be perceived as a threat. McGinty (2008), goes so far as to describe the so-called unfortunate circumstance of libraries attracting “aberrant individuals, the homeless, and the mentally ill by having comfortable public space and tolerant staff” (p. 117) in order to justify a series of security recommendations ranging from surveillance systems to panic alarms to easier police access. We believe that as socially responsible and responsive library workers invested in a just future, we have a responsibility to reevaluate how our relationships to policing and security affect all peoples, within the library and without.

For the purposes of this reevaluation, we draw on the work of abolitionists and critical theories such as intersectional feminism and critical race theory to frame our understandings. The resulting abolitionist praxis seeks to deconstruct the carceral and penal systems and recognizes the unique contexts grounding abolitionist movements worldwide. While much of the abolitionist scholarship we draw on stems from the United States, where it is grounded in the historic anti-slavery movement, we recognize the importance of decolonization and the ongoing legacy of the colonial state on Indigenous Peoples in Canadian abolition movements (Cuneen, 2023). Additionally, we recognize the critical need to deconstruct these systems in responsible ways that reallocates resources toward social infrastructures that can address the root causes of inequality.

The Carceral State

Libraries have long maintained a stance of neutrality to the end of providing access to information for all without question, though this is widely acknowledged to be a false claim as libraries reflect and reproduce the power structures of society at large (Chancellor, 2019). Tapia (2020) indicates that while the carceral state is often narrowly conceived of as those institutions and structures directly involved in the criminal justice system—police, courts, and prisons—the carceral state is better understood as a

system of “logics, ideologies, practices, and structures” that take punitive action against difference, struggle, and social justice. Through this lens, the library acting as a site of hegemonic power can be more directly identified as a node in the tangled structures of the carceral state.

Carceral Care

Libraries, like other community-oriented institutions, operate within the carceral system by providing what Moreno (2021) describes as carceral care—that is, “work that structures community-oriented caregiving but relies on carceral frameworks and power structures to produce such care” (p. 104). This reliance is in part due to the neoliberal funding models that incentivize participation in carceral activities to receive state buy-in to the library’s usefulness but also preconceptions about how this care should be delivered. If libraries are sites of carceral care, then we as the librarians and library staff providing this care become agents of the carceral state, responsible for policing patrons. Much as libraries reproduce other power structures, carceral care reproduces the tenets of the carceral state within the library.

Perhaps the most evocative depiction of the care work of libraries, Schlesselman-Tarango (2016) describes the archetypal librarian as Lady Bountiful, an upper-middle class white woman whose missionary work civilizes the library patron. Moreno’s (2021) exploration of carcerality in the library, however, suggests that Lady Bountiful is not merely a missionary with an abundance of charity, but rather a matronly prison warden. Her whiteness and class empower the enforcement of rules and her femininity to enable a patronizing practice of care all to the end of creating upstanding citizens through enforced education. Schlesselman-Tarango’s (2016) exploration of the Lady Bountiful archetype was intended to encourage library workers to consider the ways the archetype is embodied by their practice. We would continue this thread by asking library workers to consider how this reconceived “Officer Bountiful” operates through their work: the rules that are enforced for the good of patrons, the penalties for breaking these rules, and the ways we approach difficult situations.

In addition to the labour of library workers, the library's care orientation grants it other roles in the operation of the carceral state. Critically, it enables the library to become a space where police can perform outreach services and portray themselves as caregivers to the community rather than armed enforcers of law. This is most clearly apparent in the phenomenon of police chief story times (Chase, 2019). Intersectional abolitionist praxis pushes us to question why some consider this a safer program than drag queen story time—why might someone be more threatened by a man in heels than a man with a gun? While it might seem easy to address this issue by cutting ties with police, Chase (2019) cautions that it is not risk-free for libraries to divest from police in a society still reliant on the police force to address crime. Doing so may cause police to retaliate by deprioritizing or even ignoring calls to respond to theft or violent crime at the library.

Security Measures in the Library

By understanding the library as a site of the carceral state, the security measures within a library can be understood as control mechanisms meant to surveil patrons who are pre-supposed to be deviant. These carceral structures manifest as visible security monitors at the entrance of libraries, security cases for library materials, and account suspensions, among many others. The most pervasive of these is the practice of fining. Fines punish the apparent “crime” of returning a book late and place financial penalties on people who may have inconsistent access to transportation, lack of mobility, or cognitive impairments that impact their ability to comply with the library's timeline for return. These penalties are exacerbated by policies that send unpaid fines to collections agencies, creating repercussions for patrons' credit scores that could impact their ability to rent an apartment or buy a car. Only in 2019 did the State of New York pass legislation preventing library fees from affecting credit scores (Hogan, 2019). While there have been less severe approaches to fines, they are not without carceral implications either. At Los Angeles Public Library, for instance, patrons 21 years and younger were able to “read off” their library fines at a rate of \$5/hour before fines were eliminated in 2021 (LA County Library, n.d.). While this practice provided a non-financial means to resolve outstanding fines, it still privileged wealthier patrons who could afford to pay the fines outright and placed a burden on lower-income youth, who may not even

have the luxury of time to give to such an initiative. The practice of forgiving an infraction through unpaid labour also echoes court-ordered community service for criminal misdemeanors.

Breaking From Carcerality

As libraries are evidently ingrained in the carceral framework, we must consider how we might divest our institutions from the goals and processes that reproduce it. Many strategies have been tried by public libraries across North America. In the most extreme case we examined, Chicago Public Library (CPL) removed many of the carceral structures of the library such as fines, book detection systems, security cases and security monitors, in addition to prioritizing local hiring practices and increasing the retention of a diverse staff. Along with CPL, many libraries have chosen to bring social workers into their space to provide competent social supports to vulnerable patrons. While these are excellent interventions, they may require considerable financial or procedural investment that institutions may be unwilling or unable to offer. To provide alternative options for library workers that do not involve contacting the police, we have created a poster that includes emergency and non-emergency help phone lines in the Edmonton area for issues relating to houselessness, addiction, intoxication, mental health, and issues surrounding youth and their caregivers. To promote these resources, we propose a simple, acronym-based catchphrase to encourage library workers of all types to consider the ramifications of involving police in difficult patron interactions: “Before You Call the Cops, Drop a DEUCE!” The poster can be viewed at the following [link](#).

We choose to foresee a world where resources can be reallocated, shifting our priorities from policing and prisons to social structures and supports that address the root causes of social instability such as poverty, housing, and healthcare and that libraries can be leaders in guiding this change.

Works Cited

Chancellor, R. L. (2019). Communities in the crossfire: Models for public library action. *Collaborative Librarianship*, 11(1), Article 9.

- Chase, S. (2019). Considerations in Police Chief Storytimes. *Public Libraries*, 58(3), 8–10.
- Cunneen, C. (2023). Decoloniality, abolitionism, and the disruption of power. In A. Aliverti, H. Carvalho, A. Chamberlain, and M. Sozzo (Eds.), *Decolonizing the criminal question: Colonial legacies, contemporary problems* (pp. 19–35). Oxford University Press.
- Dwyer, A. (2015). Teaching young queers a lesson: How police teach lessons about non-heteronormativity in public spaces. *Sexuality & Culture*, 19(3).
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-015-9273-6>
- Hogan, G. (2019, December 5). *That 'frightening' letter from a debt collection agency could be for Overdue Library books*. Gothamist.
<https://gothamist.com/news/library-fines-debt-collection>
- LA County Library. (n.d.). *LA County Library*. <https://lacountylibrary.org/readaway/>
- McGinty, J. (2007). Enhancing building security: Design considerations. *Library & Archival Security*, 21(2). <https://doi.org/10.1080/01960070802201474>
- Moreno, T. H. (2022). Beyond the police: libraries as locations of carceral care. *Reference Services Review*, 50(1), 102–112. <https://doi.org/10.1108/RSR-07-2021-0039>
- Robinson, T. (2019). No right to rest: Police enforcement patterns and quality of life consequences of the criminalization of homelessness. *Urban Affairs Review*, 55(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087417690833>
- Schlesselman-Tarango, G. (2016). The Legacy of Lady Bountiful: White Women in the Library. *Library Trends*, 64(4), 667–686. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2016.0015>
- Tapia, R. (2020). *What is the carceral state?*, Carceral State Project.
<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/7ab5f5c3fbca46c38f0b2496bcaa5ab0>
- Verhaeghen, P., & Aikman, S. N. (2022). Police as threat: The influence of race and the summer of Black Lives Matter on implicit and explicit attitudes towards the police. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 50(8). <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22840>
- Watson, A. C., Corrigan, P. W., & Ottati, V. (2004). Police officers' attitudes toward and decisions about persons with mental illness. *Psychiatric Services*, 55(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.55.1.49>