Evidence Brief: Approaches to Public Library Safety

Context

On December 11th, 2022, a violent altercation between four youth and 28-year-old Tyree Cayer occurred at the Millennium Public Library in downtown Winnipeg, resulting in Cayer's death. Following the homicide, the library implemented new interim security measures, including police officers, security guards, bag checks, and metal detectors.

Violent incidents in North American public libraries have brought greater attention to the issue of library security and led several libraries across Canada to increase security measures, including the presence of police and security guards. However, the Millennium Public Library is the only library in Canada with weapon screening measures (CBC, 2023). While some stakeholders and patrons defend these measures as necessary to ensure safety, others argue that they create a hostile and unwelcoming environment and may discourage vulnerable and marginalized individuals from using the library's resources.

General Justification for Increased Surveillance and Security Measures

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many of the social challenges that often lead to violent incidents in public libraries. While serious incidents are rare, a 2023 study by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) found that among library workers, 78% had experienced verbal abuse, 71% had witnessed violence, 50% had experienced violence, and about 40% experienced sexual harassment or threats of physical harm. These experiences have significant impacts on feelings of safety and have led to growing concerns regarding workplace safety.

Traditionally, efforts to increase library safety have involved the implementation of surveillance technology (e.g., security cameras), monitoring suspicious behaviour, designing the space with security in mind, hiring security and police officers, and establishing clear codes of conduct (Robinson, 2019). These approaches seek to reduce opportunities for crime, e.g., by screening for weapons and having law enforcement present (Clarke, 1997). To reduce fear, theft, verbal abuse, and physical violence, several Canadian public libraries have hired security guards and implemented surveillance technology.

Criticisms of Increased Surveillance and Security Measures

- Increased police presence has negative effects on marginalized communities. Black, Indigenous, people of colour, and other marginalized individuals are more likely to be arrested/criminalized because of increased interaction with law enforcement in public spaces. Increasing the presence of police and security guards contributes to the exclusion of individuals deemed 'undesirable', which does not align with the mandate of public libraries as safe and welcoming spaces for all people (Robinson, 2019).
- Increasing surveillance and implementing security measures, such as metal detectors, is costly (Schildkraut & Grogan, 2019). Increased spending on security measures may reduce resources for other library services and programs that have greater impacts on safety and well-being (CTV News, 2010).
- Security measures, such as metal detectors and bag checks, are often viewed as excessive and intrusive. They take time to complete and tend to create a hostile, stressful, and unwelcoming environment which can discourage individuals from using the library's resources (Schildkraut & Grogan, 2019; CBC News, 2019).
- Security measures, such as metal detectors and bag checks, have unintended consequences for certain individuals, including those who are poor and/or experiencing homelessness. Not everyone can set aside alcohol, drugs, or sharp objects in a car or at home before entering the library (CBC News, 2019).
- Surveillance and security measures do not address the root causes of issues and are unlikely to contribute to a safer community in the long term. Instead, they tend to displace incidents and exacerbate social challenges.
- The differentiation between lethal weapons and nonlethal tools is often unclear (Toby, 2002). Furthermore, low quality metal detectors may not work properly or detect all dangerous tools and weapons (Plett, 2019).

Research on Surveillance and Security Measures in Public Spaces

Metal Detectors/Weapon Screening

Most research on the effectiveness of metal detectors focuses on school settings, but the conclusions and findings from these studies can be used to inform practices in other public spaces, including libraries.

- Metal detectors create a perception of improved safety, as part of a "security theatre", but there is little evidence demonstrating their effectiveness. Further, this false sense of security is exacerbated when their ineffectiveness increases feelings of insecurity while also reducing the trust and belief in the competence of those responsible for public safety (ACLU, 2012).
- Airport metal detectors demonstrate high fail rates (up to 95%) on weapon screening checks. Data show the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) failed to identify weapons during metal detector searches in an average of 80% of cases in 2017 (Schildkraut & Grogan, 2019).
- There is insufficient data to support claims that metal detectors effectively screen out weapons in schools and in fact, schools with metal detectors may be less successful at identifying weapons during searches. For instance, New York City schools reported that 57% of weapons confiscated in a single school year were found without using scanning devices (Winn, 2017).
- School personnel often lack proper training on the correct use of metal detectors, resulting in improper use. For example, studies have highlighted cases where students passed through metal detectors while they were broken or turned off (Daniels, Royster, & Vecchi, 2007).
- A review of over 15 years of research highlights there is insufficient data to determine if metal detectors in schools reduce violent behavior among students. Several studies suggested potential detrimental effects of metal detectors on perceptions of safety. Another found that school metal detector use was linked to a decrease in the likelihood of students carrying a weapon while in school (7.8% vs 13.8%), without a change in weapon carrying in other settings or a decline in participation in physical fights (Hankin, Hertz, & Simon, 2011).
- There are other ways to bring weapons into a school and mass shootings still occur when metal detectors and security officers are present – in the past, shooters have shot their way through them (Strauss, 2021).
- "Dignified screening" is a free flow, non-invasive way to conduct security checks without people feeling invaded, targeted, or stressed by the weapons screening process. Such systems single out objects, rather than individuals, which reduces biases, fosters more human interactions, blends with the environment, reduces lines and wait times, and decreases anxiety related to screening measures (Ellenbogen & Eberle, 2023).
- Data indicate that while the number of incidents at Millennium Library have decreased since the implementation of the security measures, so has the number of daily visits (Keele, 2020).

Bag Check Policies

- Evidence on bag check policies is mixed. For example, one study found that bag checks at a concert venue were effective in preventing weapons and drugs from entering the premises (Wolfson, Emshoff, Barnes, & Bingham, 2009). Conversely, another showed that bag checks at a courthouse were not effective in preventing prohibited items from entering the building (Krouse, Woods, & Rengert, 2010). Further, these policies can be discriminatory and disproportionately target racial minorities or those perceived as "suspicious".
- Bag searches in public libraries are more commonly implemented to counter high levels of theft and protect library property, as opposed to preventing violence. These are also common across university libraries in Canada and the US; however, some have recently removed bag checking policies to save patron's time and to better protect visitors' privacy (Devani & Khadka, 2016).
- To mitigate potential risks when implementing a bag check, recommendations include:
    - Clearly communicating the bag check policy to customers before they arrive (e.g., through signage or on a website) and providing details on what items are prohibited and why.
    - Training security personnel and staff to perform bag checks in a respectful and professional manner, and to identify potential threats while avoiding discriminatory practices.

- Respecting privacy by conducting bag checks in a private area out of sight of other patrons.
- Providing storage options (e.g., lockers) for prohibited items or offering services where bags can be checked in a designated area.
- Providing clear plastic bags for patrons to transfer their belongings into while circulating in the library.
- Reviewing the policy regularly to ensure it is effective and up-to-date, and making necessary changes based on the feedback from patrons and staff.

Police and/or Private Security

- No research focuses directly on the effectiveness of police presence at public libraries, but conclusions from studies examining the impact of police in schools and other public spaces are likely applicable in this context.
- Some studies have found benefits from police presence in schools, including reduced vandalism and bullying, less truancy, and increased feelings of safety among certain students (Duxbury & Bennell, 2019).
- Other studies find that school police officers do little to reduce violence and their presence is often damaging to racialized students and students with disabilities. Having police in schools can also create higher rates of behavioral incidents and spikes in suspensions, expulsions, and arrests for minor incidents (Paterson, 2022).
- Many public libraries have contract security on site (Robinson, 2019). This generally occurs among branches with the highest incident levels (CBC, 2023).
- Hiring police is very rare given the cost and risks to marginalized individuals (e.g., racialization, criminalization).
- Hiring private security does not address the root causes of social challenges and violence; rather, they are a short-term measure to help increase the immediate safety of staff and patrons (CBC, 2023).
- Library representatives stress the importance of a balanced approach with security guards as well as other social or outreach workers that can respond to mental health crises, drug poisonings, and other incidents that happen in libraries (Rudisuela, 2022).
- In a survey related to increasing safety in libraries, staff recommended that security personnel play a greater role in enforcing library policies/bylaws and doing bathroom checks. They also identified the need for better training for security guards, including training in non-violent de-escalation of crisis situations (CUPE, 2023).
- Some libraries have hired security guards as library staff instead of contracting private security companies. This ensures better alignment between security staff and the library mission/principles. It also allows the library to oversee training and include security staff in broader discussions about safety with library administration and leadership (CBC, 2023). It is important, however, to avoid blurring the distinction between library staff and security staff, and to ensure appropriate training to avoid monitoring certain individuals more than others and other negative impacts of security measures on marginalized individuals (Robinson, 2019).
- The Toronto Public Library recommended the implementation of a reporting management system, which could be managed by security staff, to identify, track, and analyze incident trends. It also recommended reviewing and evaluating training and onboarding of security guards, and ensuring their role is clearly communicated to staff and patrons (Toronto Public Library, 2022).

Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED)

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) aims to reduce crime and enhance public safety by designing and managing the physical environment in a way that discourages criminal behavior through measures such as increasing visibility and natural surveillance, minimizing opportunities for crime through site design, and creating a sense of ownership and community involvement in the space (International CPTED Association, 2022).

- CUPE indicated that poorly designed spaces (i.e., cramped, crowded, poor visibility) can create hazards that lead to violence. Changes in the physical design of libraries can reduce the occurrence and severity of violence. This could include changing counters or desks to provide adequate distance between workers and the public; designing offices and waiting areas to minimize crowding; and, arranging furniture so that staff can be seen by co-workers if assistance is needed (CUPE, 2023).

- A certified security professional and an architect familiar with CPTED should work together to avoid costly structural mistakes that create security risks. Proactive and reactive solutions include site surveys, assessments of police response, and community connections that reinforce safety. Plans for improvement include re-routing traffic patterns, identifying barriers that impair visibility, and examining landscaping, fencing, furniture, and computer placement. Solutions could include proper placement and number of cameras, type and intensity of lighting, digital access control, pedestrian traffic flow, and protection of materials (Clark, 2015).
- The Kitchener Public Library conducted a CPTED assessment which led to several recommendations that identified opportunities for natural surveillance and access control, including:
    - Turning library stacks perpendicular to the public corridor and circulation desk.
    - Installing a large mirror on the blank corridor wall opposite the circulation desk.
    - Rearranging the study carrels from an unbroken, continuous row of units located at the end of the book stacks to a series of strategically placed, independent units that maximized natural surveillance of the aisles in the newly arranged stacks.
    - Designating the secondary, rear stairwell as a fire route so that the door could be signed as a fire exit in the closed position, which requires patrons to use the main door and walk past staffed area (Public Safety Canada, n.d.).

Alternative Approaches to Prevent Violence and Increase Safety in Public Libraries

Several studies document approaches to prevent violence and increase safety in public libraries through addressing the root causes and moving away from surveillance and enforcement-based measures. They include:

- Offering staff training on violence prevention, incident management, violence de-escalation, mental health support, opioid awareness and response, harm reduction, etc. (CUPE, 2023; CBC, 2023; Toronto Public Library, 2022; Balzer, 2020; McGrath & Goulding, 1996).
- Ensuring that staff training is completed and tracked, with a focus on evaluating staff competence and confidence post-training (Toronto Public Library, 2022).
- Hiring social workers, outreach workers, Indigenous elders, peer workers, and other social navigators to assist with housing and income support, navigate the criminal legal system, address mental health needs, and bridge gaps in service (CUPE, 2023; Rudisuela, 2022; Stringer, 2020; Robinson, 2019).
- Developing partnerships with community-based organizations to offer programs and services on-site (e.g., washroom attendants, community crisis workers, youth assistance, etc.) (Kaldeway, 2023; Stringer, 2020; Robison, 2019).
- Increasing funding for public libraries to hire more staff to better address the needs of patrons (CUPE, 2023; Ridusuela, 2022; CTV, 2019).
- Organizing public consultation sessions to collaboratively identify local needs and to work towards identifying solutions that build more inclusive and equitable spaces (Kaldeway, 2023).
- Involving library frontline staff in discussions by providing opportunities for them to share their experiences, concerns, and suggestions for improving safety (e.g., through staff town halls and surveys) (Toronto Public Library, 2022).

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