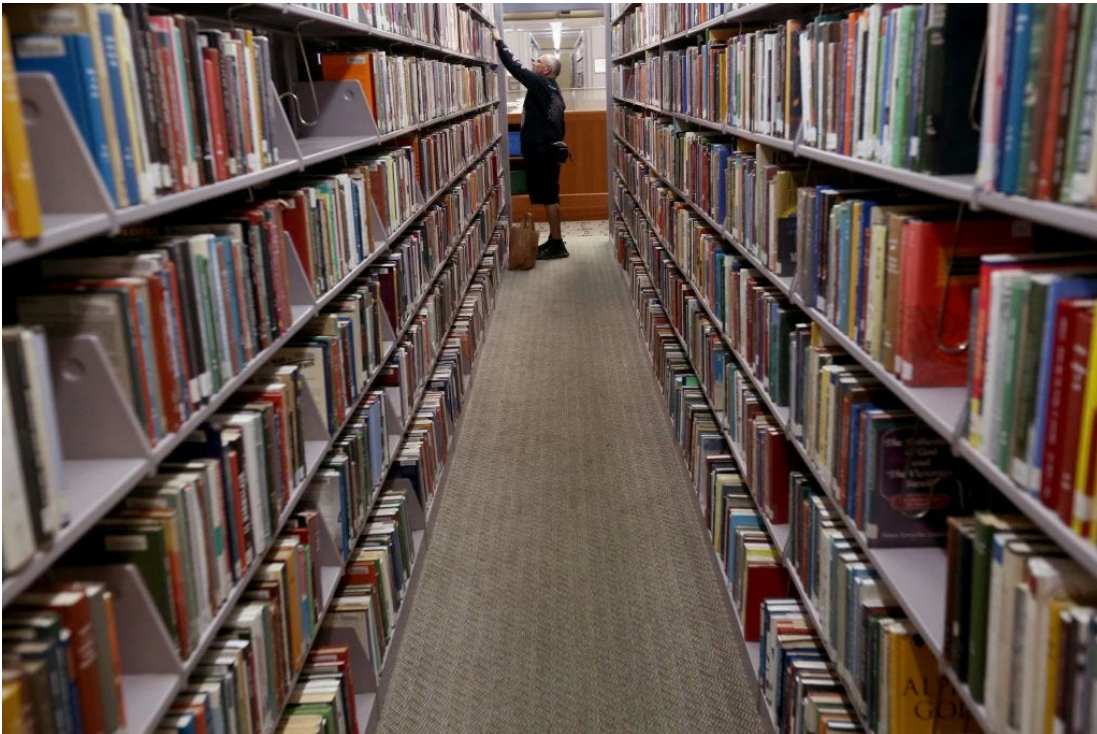


The Death of the Public Library

Public libraries are in decline not because of the internet or because people are reading less, but because they have become de facto homeless shelters.



"CURRENT PRACTICES AREN'T SOLVING HOMELESSNESS, BUT SEEM WELL ON THEIR WAY TO DESTROYING THE PUBLIC LIBRARY," WRITES ZAC BISSONNETTE. (GENARO MOLINA / LOS ANGELES TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES)

By Zac Bissonnette

I was excited about the Mandel Public Library when I moved to West Palm Beach, Florida, in early 2023. The city was on the rise, and *Fodor's Travel* had named Mandel the fourth most beautiful public library in America.

Then I started going there.

I watched a security guard tell a man who appeared to be homeless that he wasn't allowed back for another month. In the new books section, a guy yelled into his phone that he'd been kicked off the bus for arguing with a driver. Other homeless people slept in chairs and snored; the smell made you hold your breath.

Beautiful though it was, with high rounded ceilings and a coffee shop in the lobby, I wondered how people could use this library as a place to read and study. The answer, I soon discovered, is that increasingly, they don't.

Between 2012 and 2019, according to the Institute of Museum and Library Services, visits to the Mandel Library declined 27 percent, and total circulation—the number of items, including e-books, borrowed by library patrons—fell 26 percent.

And even as newcomers poured into South Florida, the trend has not reversed, with visits falling another 31 percent since 2019, meaning that visits have declined a staggering 50 percent. The statistic showing a dramatic increase, on the other hand, is not the one you want to see. According to the library's director, Lisa Hathaway, "behavior incident reports"—everything from sleeping in the library to harassment of other patrons as well as staff—have risen by 41 percent since 2019.

Rather than resisting their role as first responders to the homeless, librarians have embraced it, to the detriment of everyone else who wants to use a library.

"It's another reason," Hathaway told me, "we hired a social worker."

My local library is hardly an aberration. All over the country, libraries are seeing fewer visitors and more problems. Per-resident visits to public libraries fell by 56.6 percent in the 10 years ending in 2022. Meanwhile,

a report from the Urban Libraries Council found that between 2019 and 2023, security incidents rose at its 115 member libraries, even as visits fell another 35 percent.

It's not a coincidence, of course, that visits are down while incidents are up. When librarians talk about the decreasing visit numbers—which they prefer not to—they say that fewer people are coming to libraries because Americans are reading less. But with print sales up and bookstores making a comeback, that explanation doesn't make sense. Rather, a major reason libraries are in decline is that, as a former librarian wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* in 2007, libraries have become “a de facto daytime shelter for the city's homeless.” Indeed, when libraries research what people dislike about their institution, they often find that the homeless population now congregating in the library is the biggest complaint.

In recent years, as it has become clear that progressive solutions to quality of life problems have usually backfired, cities like Los Angeles and San Francisco have begun retreating from them. But not librarians. Rather than resisting their emerging role as social worker and first responder to the homeless, they have embraced it, to the detriment of everyone else who wants to use a library.





A homeless man carries his belongings into the San Francisco Main Library in March 2019. (Lea Suzuki / *San Francisco Chronicle* via Getty Images)

If there are two people who represent competing visions for what libraries should be, they are librarian trainers Ryan Dowd and Steve Albrecht. The two are friends, but their approaches are very different. Dowd, who once ran a homeless shelter in Aurora, Illinois, is the author of *The Librarian's Guide to Homelessness: An Empathy-Driven Approach to Solving Problems, Preventing Conflict, and Serving Everyone*. He told me he originally wanted to title the book *How to Run Your Library Like a Homeless Shelter*. When I asked if he was joking, he said he wasn't sure. He has given seminars for roughly half the nation's librarians, including most of the largest systems. His influence is unquestioned.

Dowd's essential belief is that not only do the homeless have every right to spend their days in libraries but that librarians should view their needs as a critical part of the job. He believes librarians should be trained to dispense Narcan. One of his seminars is called "Jerks with Homes: How to Deal with Members of the Public Who Are Being Jerks

About Homeless Folks.” His scripts for addressing problematic behaviors include examples like, “Hey, I don’t care if you urinate on the *Harry Potter* books, but the politicians have a no-urinating policy. Therefore, I have to ask you to stop.”

Dowd advocates for “inclusion,” even when it seems to come at the expense of the library’s environment. In Dowd’s book, some people who complain about the homeless are “everyday sadists.” As for the body odor that permeates so many public libraries, he writes that “There is a certain amount of odor that we can expect whenever we go out in public. Other people use odor as an excuse to vent their prejudices. Don’t let someone’s hypersensitivity or bias rule the day if the smell really isn’t that bad.”

When I pointed out to him that library visits were in steep decline, he said he was unaware of that data. Could *any* institution take comfort in smells that “aren’t that bad?” I asked.

“To me,” Dowd said, “community means it’s literally for all, including people that might make us uncomfortable.”

Most librarians I spoke with were nervous about discussing the homeless problem because they’ve seen the consequences of bucking the progressive tide that swept America’s libraries.

Albrecht, a former San Diego cop who has done library security training for 25 years, takes a tougher approach. He advises librarians to “stop apologizing” for measures designed to make their libraries safe and appealing environments. Some topics he covers in his webinar program include Our List of Challenging Patrons: From Pets to Pedophiles, and Issues Enforcing Our Code of Conduct.

“We are losing control of a facility that has always been benevolent and peaceful for the community,” Albrecht told me.

While Dowd’s trainings include strategies for reducing police calls, Albrecht worries that many librarians aren’t calling the police enough.

“People in the library world sometimes misunderstand that one of the primary functions of the police is to preserve the peace,” he told me. “Police can do a lot of good by just telling someone they have to leave.”



Homeless man David Cross, 66, beds down for the night on the patio of the Sarasota public library in Sarasota, Florida, in April 2016. (Linda Davidson / *The Washington Post* via Getty Images)

Most librarians I spoke with were nervous about discussing these problems because they’ve seen the consequences of bucking the progressive tide that swept America’s libraries. Amanda Oliver, a former Washington, D.C. librarian, is the author of *Overdue: Reckoning with the*

Public Library, a book that describes the problems that come with the homeless takeover of the library. She told me, “I was only able to write this book because I was no longer a librarian.”

Oliver still had to be careful. The book was published in 2022, and it explains that while hiring a police officer did reduce violent incidents and made some patrons feel safer, “The officers also did very little, if not nothing, to address the systemic issues in the neighborhood.”

I said it seemed like a tall order to expect systemic issues to be addressed by a library cop. She agreed.

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“I think I treaded very, very lightly given the time period that it was,” Oliver said, referring to the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement after George Floyd’s murder. “I was trying to make sure that people know I don’t love police. There was a lot of stuff that I did to make it seem even-keeled and empathetic. But I *am* even-keeled and empathetic, and I don’t think I needed that.”

Even with her attempts to be empathetic, she said she still had talks canceled over her portrayal of the crisis in American libraries.

Albrecht has run into similar issues. In 2015, he wrote a book for the American Library Association called *Library Security: Better Communication, Safer Facilities*. But, he said, in the wake of the 2020 protests, the organization canceled a second edition of his book because it didn’t want to be associated with a former cop. (The ALA didn’t respond to repeated requests for comment.) He said he found the episode “very hurtful,” and he has since removed his law enforcement

career from his LinkedIn page and from some of his marketing materials.

“I don’t want people to have some preconceived notion that I’m some Hitlerian guy,” Albrecht said. “I just want people to have a nice time at the library.”

I asked Oliver why librarians are so cautious about all this.

“My best guess is that it has something to do with wanting to uphold the very romantic stereotypes about what libraries are,” she said. Discussions of libraries are filled with slogans like “Everyone is welcome,” and there is little appetite for questions about how that can work in the world as it currently exists.



In 2018, Fobazi Ettarh, an academic librarian, wrote a paper in which she coined the term *vocational awe*. The paper, which quickly went viral among librarians, is a sharp takedown of what it calls a popular belief that “libraries as institutions are inherently good, sacred notions, and therefore beyond critique.”

Although Ettarh is a progressive—she described herself as a “radical librarian”—she doesn’t shrink from discussing the failings of libraries.

Ettarh grew up the daughter of a pastor, and she told me she hears echoes of the church in the ways librarians talk about libraries: Conflicts and contradictions are dismissed, and tough questions are sidestepped.

According to the Los Angeles Times, a third of Los Angeles librarians have now been trained on Narcan use—a development that is mostly celebrated in the media and among librarians.

For instance, Ettarh wondered how librarians can dispense Narcan and then host story time. “Library workers—who are already overworked and have little to no medical training or mental health support—are expected to repeatedly take on this issue, and are celebrated for it as if adding this very charged task to their job expectations is natural or uncomplicated,” she said.

Albrecht agrees with her. When someone uses Narcan to awaken addicts from an opioid fix, he said, “They come back delirious and vomiting and angry that you interrupted their high. It seems out of scope for the librarian’s job description.”

But according to the *Los Angeles Times*, a third of Los Angeles librarians have now been trained on Narcan use—a development that is mostly celebrated in the media and among librarians.



Visitors, some homeless, leave en masse from the Richard J. Riordan Central Library in Los Angeles in August 2023. (Genaro Molina / *Los Angeles Times* via Getty Images)

But as libraries stock up on Narcan, efforts to implement rules to improve the environment encounter resistance. For instance, some libraries have implemented limits on bag sizes in response to concerns about bedbugs and bad smells when homeless people bring all their possessions with them. But homeless advocates, including those in West Palm Beach, call this an attack on the homeless. Ettarh disagrees.

“Anything that limits access to the patrons in any way is seen by many as a betrayal of the library rhetoric that all are welcome,” she told me. “But those who are, for better or for worse, paying taxes toward the community—their needs are also vital. There are always limits on what you can bring into any sort of space. I don’t see how the library is exempt from these rules and expectations.

“It ends up falling on librarians to try to strike some impossible balance,” she said.

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The shift toward a social-services mission can be seen in the stacks: Between 2010 and 2022, the print book collections in America’s public libraries shrank by 19 percent, according to Institute of Museum and Library Services data—even as retail sales of print books rose.

Tim Coates, who ran the British bookstore chain Waterstones in the 1980s, calls the decisions made by libraries a “complete misdiagnosis” of what the public wants. Since 2019, he has published surveys called the Freckle Project that gauge changes in reading habits and how they affect libraries. He says that the data shows that people want libraries to be about “books and a nice place to study.”

He finds the state of things agonizing. “They’ve taken all the things they’re good at and lost them in the pursuit of something they’ll never be good at.”

Librarians, for the most part, are not open to this critique. When the American Library Association had its annual meeting last week, the discussion wasn’t focused on these depressing statistics. Rather, the group’s incoming president spoke about the role librarians play in preserving democracy.

“How on earth can a librarian’s role be to preserve and protect democracy?” Coates asked in a post on X. “Their role is to help people find what they want to read.”

“I’ll say *circulations and visits are down*,” Coates told me. “And they’ll say that’s not a measure of what we do, because *we transform people’s lives*. But if people aren’t coming, then you’re not transforming their lives.”

When I asked Lisa Hathaway, the director of the Mandel Library, whether she found it a challenge to serve both her traditional library patrons and the homeless population who spend their days there, she disagreed with the premise. “We don’t necessarily see serving our diverse population as a challenge. It’s a core position. *Challenge* is not a word we use here at our library.”



In January, Barnes & Noble announced that it planned to open 60 new locations in 2025—a record—on top of the 57 stores it opened in 2024. In making the announcement, a company spokesperson told *People magazine* that “Many readers were looking for a place to spend time and connect with other people in their community. Our bookstores became a safe and welcoming space to meet up with friends and explore the stacks.”

This, of course, is the role libraries have historically played—and should still play. Instead, as libraries look to be “everything to everybody,” as one librarian put it, they are becoming less and less to fewer and fewer people.

Current practices aren’t solving homelessness, but seem well on their way to destroying the public library. As one anonymous librarian said in response to a survey about mentally ill library guests, “This problem, *not the invention of the internet*, could prove to be the final demise of the public library as we know it.”

Ettarh seemed sad when I asked her about the declining visit numbers.

“I really understand why so many library workers want to keep saying yes. But, ironically, it’s always giving in, always saying yes—that’s what will lead to the destruction of libraries. We don’t want to be subsumed. We don’t want to be a community center.”



Zac Bissonnette lives in West Palm Beach. He is the author of several books, including The Great Beanie Baby Bubble.

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