
Library theft prevention

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The results of an informal survey of collection security precautions among North American libraries.

In late 1982 and early 1983, the Security Committee of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of ACRL conducted an informal survey of libraries in North America to learn what policies and procedures were in place for protection against library theft. The survey was conducted by questionnaires addressed to library administrators. In order to assure that the administrators were aware of recent recommendations on library security, copies of the ACRL-approved "Guidelines for the Security of Rare Book, Manuscript, and Other Special Collections" (published in *C&RL News*, March 1982, pp.90-93) were sent along with the questionnaire.

While the survey was being conducted, a major international conference on library theft was being planned for Oberlin College under a special grant from the H. W. Wilson Foundation. The information generated by the survey complements the deliberations of the conference which was held in September 1983. The results of the survey will be of interest to library administrators, the Oberlin Conference participants, and others concerned with security of library collections.

In the 1970s many libraries began to develop written plans for emergency response to life-threatening and collection-threatening situations. Conservation programs, improved fire-detection and fire-fighting systems, evacuation procedures, and water-damage procedures have now been dealt with by many libraries. Security planning to protect against theft and, particularly, to deal with

theft once it has occurred, has generally lagged behind disaster planning.

There are undoubtedly numerous reasons for the slow development of security plans. Among the more important are a general lack of awareness of the significance of library theft and its impact on the integrity of library collections and services. There are still no adequate means of monitoring loss rates, and most libraries are unwilling or unable within present budgets to support systematic inventories. The open-plan library buildings most common in North American libraries work against sound access control, and the monitoring of the use of collections in such buildings is extremely difficult. Perhaps another factor working against development of security plans is that most librarians would prefer not to deal with the distasteful topic of theft.

There is some evidence of improvement in library security. Recent large-scale book thefts have generated significant international notoriety, and that works to the advantage of librarians in developing good security plans. Katharine Leab and Daniel J. Leab, publishers of *American Book Prices Current*, recognizing the significance of centralized information about book theft, have developed an online, computer-based information service for reporting stolen or missing books and manuscripts (the service is Bookline Alert: Missing Books and Manuscripts, or BAMBAM). The Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America, constantly

mindful of the financial impact of book theft, has published a pamphlet on how to deal with book theft. The proceedings of the Oberlin Conference on Theft will also be published soon.

The RBMS Security Committee's questionnaire was distributed regionally. The informal nature of the survey should not be construed as statistically balanced, but merely as an indicator of the status of security planning in North American libraries. The Committee received about fifty responses from libraries polled.

The questionnaire covered four main categories. The first, Policies and Procedures, sought to determine the level of security consciousness in libraries and whether the libraries have yet adopted a written policy. Most libraries reported that they make a distinction between building security and collection security, but few have yet adopted written collection security policies. The few policies that have been adopted appear to have been developed independently of the RBMS Guidelines, although most respondents viewed their policies as compatible with those recommended by RBMS. Few libraries reported any systematic tracking of loss rates, a response not surprising in North America where few libraries maintain inventory control. Virtually all the libraries believed that a telephone call from a bookseller who had recovered a stolen book would be referred to the proper library official.

The second category dealt with responsibility for library security. Most responses indicated that there is no distinction made between a security guard (an individual responsible for building security) and a security officer (an individual responsible for the security of the collections). Only about a third of the libraries responded that they now have a security officer, and even fewer have assigned responsibility to the security officer for developing and implementing a security program. About a fourth of the libraries indicated that they plan to appoint a security officer, but a sizable number of respondents indicated that they did not know if their library was planning such an appointment (an indication that the questionnaire was being answered by someone outside the upper levels of administration).

The third category in the questionnaire dealt with policies for marking library materials. This

section was aimed primarily at special collections operations, because such operations have frequently declined to add any markings to materials in their charge, presumably relying on their closer control of access to materials for security. The RBMS Guidelines for Marking advocate systematic marking to discourage theft and to facilitate recovery of stolen items. The responses were about evenly divided as to whether the library's special collections operation calls for marking. For those that have a marking policy, only one-fourth follow the RBMS Guidelines.

The final section of the questionnaire dealt with security measures in general collections. It is clear from the responses that there is fairly widespread use of electronic perimeter control systems that signal if an item is removed from the library before being properly charged to a user. Many of the respondents assumed that the questionnaire was primarily concerned with books of high monetary value. Thus a number of libraries reported that more valuable books were kept hidden on special shelves behind the reference desk, in cages, or in closed stacks. More typically though, there seemed to be general reliance on general building security to discourage theft. With respect to distinctions between marking of general and special collections, as might be expected, the general collections of most libraries are systematically, visibly, and indelibly marked.

One can conclude, then, that the libraries in North America need more information on the problems of library theft. A heightening of awareness about the problem is still needed, but so are effective procedures and policies for dealing with collection security. The Security Committee of RBMS at its meeting at the 1984 Midwinter Conference of ALA accepted charges to develop two new manuals for dealing with library security. One will deal with theft prevention and the other will deal with procedures to follow once a theft has occurred. The Committee will welcome input from librarians, booksellers, collectors, and others concerned with theft of library materials. ■■

Ban bombs, not books

Librarians for Nuclear Arms Control (LNAC) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization open to librarians, library educators, library aides, and paraprofessionals who share a common concern about the risk of nuclear war. The group seeks to pool the professional skills of its members to reduce the likelihood of a nuclear holocaust. For further information, contact LNAC, 311 E. Glenarm Street, #8, Pasadena, CA 91106.

Whiteley completes administration program

Sandy Whiteley, ACRL program officer, completed the National College of Education's Program in Administration for Women in Higher Education on May 13.

The program, held at the college's Evanston campus, is designed for the professional advancement of women in non-profit organizations. Twenty-one women attended the series of five weekend seminars, held during the 1983-84 academic year.

The National College of Education, founded in 1886, has campuses in Evanston, Chicago, and Lombard, Illinois.