Whose Safety is the Priority?
Attending to LIS Grassroots Movements and Patron Concerns Around Policing and Public Libraries

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Abstract

Police and policing have tacitly, and at times explicitly, been normalized as aspects of library service in the U.S. As American forms of policing are exported at an international scale, this has international implications. Justification for embedded policing inside library walls has turned upon librarian and library staff conceptions of safety. This essay posits that a lack of critical engagement with the topics of policing and safety reflects the deficit of substantive discourse around antiracist pedagogy within library and information science (LIS) education and practice. The paper pairs critical research on safety and criminalization with patrons' comments on policing and grassroots activism by LIS professionals to rethink safety as something shared between librarians, staff, patrons, and potential patrons (the community). Ongoing, organized campaigns around policing and security within libraries are documented so that their efforts, trials, and successes will engender further research and set a marked precedent of how LIS education and professions can reevaluate the role of policing and police in library settings everywhere.

Keywords: divestment; grassroots activism; libraries; policing; risk; safety; social justice

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Introduction

> "Officer [name redacted] got us kicked out after following us and saying, 'I'm waiting for a reason to kick you guys out.' I felt very, very mad about it… No matter what I gave everybody in that library respect… I felt that the officer was racist, including the manager. If you look at the reviews about the library, you'll see that it needs a big change." - A teen patron who experienced racial profiling at the St. Louis (Missouri-USA) County Library (Libraries for All STL, 2020a)

> "It was devastating. I felt embarrassed and humiliated." - Carlos Greer, a patron who was racially profiled at a New York (USA) Public Library event (2016)

Examination of how policing is positioned and implemented within academic, public, and special libraries in the U.S. reveals that policies about contacting the police or embedding police presence inside a library enact unequal and dangerous forms of power. Within the library and information science field (LIS), security policies have historically been weighted toward the experiences of white, middle-class, cisgender library and information professionals,

much to the detriment of library patrons and LIS professionals who do not fit the mainstream patriarchal, hegemonic identity construct. The quotes that open this essay are emblematic of how the primacy given to the experiences of white, middle-class LIS professionals have excluded significant portions of our patron bases and have alienated diverse LIS professionals through a disregard of their experiences of risk and safety in regards to policing and surveillance. The prioritization of white librarians' experiences of risks and claims to safety furthers the project of white supremacy within LIS.

This problem has international implications, as policing and militarization are used to uphold colonialist and imperialist maneuvers that are understood to be rooted in the U.S.'s attempt to hold dominance over peoples and economic markets worldwide (McGreevey, 2017; Steinmetz et al. 2017; Schrader, 2019). Writing in the wake of the 2020 George Floyd uprisings, *New Republic* journalist, Laura Weiss (2020), directly connects policing in America to its international scope:

> While the U.S. polices (soc) Black and brown neighborhoods within its own borders as internal colonies, it exports those same militarized and abusive policing techniques to almost every country in the world, through both the State Department and Department of Defense, as well as private contractors. Though it's difficult to obtain a full accounting, in 2018 alone, the U.S. appropriated over \$19 billion in security aid to military and police forces to 144 countries around the world, according to the Security Assistance Monitor. (para. 2)

Marenin's (1986) review of the implementation of American police and military training in Sub-Saharan Africa, and specifically in Zaire, includes a review of the export of American police training that dates back to the 1900s. Marenin (1986) reports that before 1973, the countries involved in the training included Germany, Guatemala, Iran, Japan, Malaysia, and the Philippines, in addition to individual graduates from the International Police Academy. More recently, McCleod (2010) found that the U.S. has "trained well over twenty thousand foreign law enforcement officers at schools in the U.S., Botswana, Thailand, Hungary, El Salvador, and Peru," (pp. 85-86) and has shaped criminal justice practices and processes across the globe. The criminalization and subsequent antagonization of unhoused people by police occurs worldwide, including by educational spaces/spaces that preach democratic participation.

Policing inside the U.S., at its borders, and as an exported model of conduct is increasingly militarized and militaristic, and is racialized under the premise of the War on Drugs (Radil et al., 2017). Library security and community-based police practices vary by geographic location worldwide, and may not overlap as they do in the U.S. However, it is likely that libraries outside of the U.S. are located in areas where an American influence has shaped policing, as the projects of American imperialism and the carceral state exist as "sequential and consubstantial" historical processes (Schrader, 2019, p. 309).

In the summer of 2020, the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) President and Secretary-General released a statement entitled, "Racism has no place in the society libraries are working to build" (MacKenzie & Leitner, 2020). This statement, along with statements from the American Library Association (ALA) and the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), reflects that the normalization of police presence in American libraries is being disturbed (Garcia-Febo, 2020). In addition to these association-level position statements, recent scholarship and grassroots calls-to-action reflect that librarians and library staff are thinking critically about the costs and consequences of police presence in libraries.

Robinson (2019) offers a review of approaches to library security and policing in North America, noting racism and white supremacy as factors shaping policing practices in library settings. He critiques the library and information science (LIS) field for an overreliance on perspectives that prioritize the aims and roles of current and former police at the expense of patron safety. Dapier and Knox (2020) have explicitly warned that "[e]very time library staffers call the police, we put the lives of our Black patrons in danger" (p. 49). Macrina has called for librarians and library staff to reassess their definitions of safety (Balzer, 2020).

Grassroots movements throughout the U.S. have called for libraries to divest from police, revealing at times the large amounts of money—sometimes millions of dollars a year—that library systems devote to policing and security forces (Fassler & Ventura, 2021). These budgets and the normalization of not only policing in libraries, but the incorporation of police into regular library programming[1], reveal the frequency with which police are invited into library spaces. This is done with little consideration for patrons' experiences, or the barriers to information access that police presence (or threat of presence) might hold for patrons and potential patrons.

This essay engages deeply with Macrina's call to reconsider safety and risk in library spaces by drawing from academic literature alongside patrons', librarians', and library staff's[2] experiences with policing in libraries. This paper introduces grassroots campaigns and activities into the record of LIS, revealing that library workers are already reflecting on and engaging in new approaches to library safety and risk, in alignment with "the society libraries are working to build" (MacKenzie & Leitner, 2020, para. 1). Practices of policing and security in libraries evoke and are invoked by fear, and are animated through conceptions of safety that are rooted in white supremacist histories of prioritized access (Balzer, 2020; Sutherland, 2019). Sutherland, in an examination of the record-making and record-keeping practices of police, traces the long history of claims to safety as part of a colonial project that involved encroachment, enslavement, violence, and death. Sutherland is clear that "safety" has a coded history in state practices of policing, data aggregation, and surveillance. This essay draws from Sutherland's work with the carceral archive and policing practices to identify dispersed flows of power between state practices of policing and individuals in library settings, including librarians, library staff, community groups, and patrons. This discourse finds that conceptions of risk and safety are differently deployed and valued in conversations about policing in libraries, and that the severity of risk that these actors describe varies from discomfort to fear of physical harm based on their experiences with police.

A primary concern of this essay is identifying how policing in libraries has become normalized because critical discussions of systemic oppression and intersectional identities are not incorporated into LIS education, or widely addressed within the profession as a whole (Sweeney, et al., 2016; Whisner, 2014). This erasure not only normalizes policing in library spaces, but also disregards the societal experiences of Black and Indigenous LIS workers and librarians and staff of color who may come to work in libraries already carrying traumatic experiences involving law enforcement. Also, the frontline, precarious work of LIS professionals who have organized to create socially just and welcoming library systems remains largely ignored throughout the field (Schwartz, 2020).

As a form of disruption to counter this subtle yet impactful perplexity, this essay covers concepts that provide context for current policing divestment efforts in libraries across the U.S., with an emphasis on substantiating those efforts with descriptions of patrons' library experiences. This

article closes by documenting various library campaigns that push to divest from or otherwise reduce library-based partnerships with police.

What Safety Means in LIS

The most popular texts and webinars on U.S. library security are written by people with backgrounds in policing and security (Albrecht, 2015; Graham, 2012). These texts fail to interrogate the relationship between library security staff and community police officers, and instead encourage autocratic collaborations between police and library staff (Robinson, 2019). In these scenarios, library employees are encouraged to use the same dehumanizing phrasing that police utilize when addressing patrons during moments of disruption in the library (Albrecht, 2015), replaying phrases that people who have been subject to policing and incarceration will recognize, which may re-traumatize patrons. Additionally, these trainings advocate for library employees to invite police deeper into library spaces, including employee break rooms. Patrons and staff who have had repeated and routine encounters with aggressive policing, who have been incarcerated, or are connected to people who have been subject to processes of criminalization, recognize that the types of policing and police presence in the library constitute a potential threat to their well-being (Geller et al., 2014). As one speaker at a Los Angeles, California Public Library (LAPL) Board of Library Commissioners meeting stated:

> Consider that police presence in our libraries is not only quite obviously violent and unnecessary, it's also such an undermining distraction to learning and study. Having police in a room doesn't allow most of us to focus on anything except the absolutely terrifying fact that there are police in a room. (Library patron, August 13, 2020)

What this patron describes diverges from a sense of safety and belonging. Yet safety is largely the language that has been employed within LIS to justify the use of police as a threatening presence inside library walls. Positioning the library within the larger American social context reveals that the employment of "safety" is racialized, intended to protect whiteness, and has led to the harassment, violence, and potential or actual death of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) (Sutherland, 2019). Because LIS as a profession has been so deeply steeped in cultural whiteness, librarians and educators who have made these appeals to safety must interrogate why and how safety is a narrative deployed in support of white supremacy.

Additionally, librarians and library staff who rely heavily on the threat or use of the police need to recognize that policing is not a one-time event. Police and police structures saturate much of the experience of BIPOC, poor and unhoused people, and queer and trans people in profound and life-shaping ways. Consider the effects of the American school-to-prison pipeline,[3] and the community-led push for schools to promote safety for BIPOC students by divesting from police (Advancement Project and Alliance for Educational Justice, 2018; Ali-Smith, 2020; Black Organizing Project, 2019). Youth who experience policing in their schools may meet with the same officers or the same types of surveillance in their local libraries. This is not a hypothetical situation. One patron of the LAPL system spoke to the Board of Library Commissioners about the experiences of her children, stating:

> [T]hey're voracious readers, but what they also are is traumatized by the amount of criminalization that they're forced to deal with. First, at their schools—LAUSD[4]—and you've heard the cry not only from the community but from the youth, the students deserve... pushing to get police out of schools; that absolutely needs to be extended to

the libraries. Police have no place in libraries. If we want our youth to read and love learning, and utilize these beautiful places that you have to do those things, they can't be criminalized while doing them, too, as so many of the youth in our city have been. (LAPL Library patron, July 23, 2020)

Indeed, LIS professionals should hold the profession accountable to critically engage in topics about safety, risk, policing, and surveillance in libraries, instead of further entrenching a definition of safety that reinstates existing social relationships of privilege and oppression. A definition of safety shared between librarians, staff, patrons, and potential patrons should preclude the use of policing as a threat for behavioral control and further direct LIS's focus to concepts like material redistribution and resource sharing. Librarians and library staff across the U.S. are currently engaged in this work. For example, there are librarians and staff who are acting in response to community calls to reimagine safety as a shared resource, and to create action beyond performative statements of inclusivity and support for Black Lives Matter (Abolitionist Library Association, 2021a; Mehra, 2021). Efforts to reimagine safety as something shared and mutually constituted resists white supremacy, criminalization, and systemic oppression in order to create more information-rich worlds for all librarians, staff, library patrons, and potential patrons.

Librarianship is a profession historically rooted in whiteness, and one that continues to draw a large demographic of white professionals (Ettarh, 2018). In this context, appeals to safety and security often carry an implicit bias toward the maintenance of LIS as a discipline, and specifically of libraries as culturally white institutions. Neoliberalism and racial capitalism in LIS (Hudson, 2021) shape discussions about threatening or problematic patrons, furthering oppressive policies that push people into social and economic precarity. Also, LIS's theoretical paradigm fails to position the library within a web of constantly decreasing societal resources available to people whose existences are infringed upon through processes of policing and incarceration. In other words, the failure of white librarians and staff to "police their imagination" (Rankine, 2014, p. 135)[5] in relation to their perceptions of threats, ignores the real threat that implementing police in the library communicates to potential or actual library patrons. This failure criminalizes people who should have access to library spaces, and reveals latent bias (intentionally or unintentionally) ignored within LIS.

Safety, as it has been utilized to justify policing in libraries, not only communicates a set of cultural assumptions about and to patrons, but also silences librarians and library staff who do not have or have not always had access to the privilege that allows individuals to see police as "safe" (Alston, 2020; Rosen, 2020). Librarians and library staff who have been homeless, incarcerated, dealt with addiction, experienced food insecurity, or are connected to people and communities that share these experiences are more likely to have encountered the brunt end of policing. Consequently, when a library calls the police for assistance, the action likely furthers the criminalization of patrons, potential patrons, and may push library workers whose experiences don't align with the middle-class, whitewashed culture of LIS out of the field.[6]

LIS's Educational Deficit

LIS as a theoretical framework, practice, and professional identity needs to recognize that when librarians and staff act on r racialized fears in the name of safety, they increase the likelihood that patrons will face cruelty or death. LIS education that does not incorporate information about criminalization and the violence it holds for library patrons, both in and outside of the library

(Jaschik, 2019; Lashley, 2008; Thacker, 2006), normalizes white supremacist violence. A curriculum that lacks this information fails to implicate the role of policing and surveillance within library settings. It is a detriment to library patrons and the communities in which they live that future library leaders are not educated to critically approach library security from a lens that incorporates social analyses of policing. This positions the library within a system of sites of potential threat for patrons and staff who have historically been marginalized through mainstream library and information services (Honma, 2005).

This educational deficit manifests in library practices that normalize systems of policing, surveillance, and incarceration within libraries, including library-police partnerships (Balzer, 2020; Bradbury, 2016). Lack of discourse about library security and safety from a critical lens disregards the realities of violence and trauma that many library staffers, patrons, and possible patrons have experienced in what are considered routine encounters with police.

To move toward a concept of safety as something shared between librarians, library staff, library patrons, and the community-at-large, librarians and library staff can change their approach by following Harbin's advice to:

> (a) understand that feelings and beliefs about safety are deeply racialized;

> (b) cultivate empathetic habits and inclusive practices that build capacity for responding to harm, danger, and our perceptions of harm and danger; and,

> (c) transform the realities of structural racism that protect white people and endanger others. (Harbin, 2017, p. 164)

Divestiture from Library Policing

Organized movements for all library settings to divest from police, and security models that rely on police, have cropped up in an organic response to recent nationwide uprisings against police brutality and for abolition in the U.S. (#8toAbolition). Additionally, library workers are facing dangerous working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in several labor rights and police abolition movements from library workers across the nation. For example, in 2020, The Concerned Black Workers of the Free Library of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania saw support from bestselling authors in their call for Library Director Siobhan Reardon's resignation due to an iterative context of socio-cultural apathy within the Free Library of Philadelphia's workplace environment (Harden, 2020). Emboldened by some libraries' attachments to the Black Lives Matter movement, Philadelphia library workers are calling for accountability and action rather than performative statements (Dean, 2020). Similar social movements amongst library workers are happening all over America: AbLa Ivy+ Libraries (2020), Libraries for All St. Louis (2020b), People for a Police-Free Library (2020) in Los Angeles, California, Police Out of NYC (New York City) Libraries ([@CopFreeLibrary], (n.d.). Many library-worker groups have called for a commitment to police divestment from libraries, and have proposed a range of holistic public safety interventions and participatory budgeting processes. Libraries, including Brooklyn Public Library in New York and Denver Public Library in Colorado, have held virtual programs and created enduring library guides that connect patrons to resources that can be utilized rather than calling the police; resources have also been created to provide information for ongoing social movements to reduce policing (Brooklyn Public Library, 2020; Eckles, 2020).

Nearly a year into organizing, these and similar campaigns are meeting substantial barriers to communicating with their library governing boards via public comments at meetings, which has been vital to achieving their goals. Altered public comment rules, such as the Los Angeles Public Library disallowing public response within meetings and the St. Louis County Library's requirement that all public comments be made in person rather than via email correspondence, make it increasingly difficult to record public comments and sentiments (People for a Police-Free Library campaign member, personal communication, July 3, 2021). As such, in this essay we signpost a few of the numerous comments made in 2020 to ensure they are on the record (see Appendix A). Despite these barriers, library workers, students, and patrons in North America continue to organize across library systems and geographic regions for police abolition under the umbrella of the Abolitionist Library Association (2021b), or AbLA, which is open to new membership.

Conclusion

If LIS conceptualizes the library as an evolving organism, then the aforementioned library worker-led, grassroots movements are facilitating transformative growth needed to sustain such an organism (Ranganathan, 1931). It is important for LIS researchers to document these movements, and for LIS programs to embed these historical and ongoing movements into their courses. These movements illustrate the possibility of critically engaging with the field in order to encourage LIS toward goals that enhance the common good, and away from harmful narratives of safety and fear that work through the criminalization of library patrons and potential patrons. It is a disservice to future library leaders, and the communities they intend to serve, to erase and marginalize the grassroots movements led by library professionals and library users. LIS as a field preaches and enforces respectability politics and civility, which alienates, isolates, surveils LIS students, and indoctrinates library professionals into white supremacist cultural norms (Galvan, 2015; Hathcock, 2015). Future LIS research needs to document the work of LIS professionals and library workers who are engaged in community work that rejects white supremacy in theory and action. Policing, in all its forms and manifestations, and social movements within and beyond LIS, must be examined in LIS programs under feminist, queer, and critical race theories in conjunction with meaningful action to create LIS professionals well-suited for a field that necessitates anti-oppressive praxis (Freire, 1970).

Across the U.S., library patrons are expressing that their desire or need for library access means they may be placed into situations where they experience criminalization, where their fear is not recognized, and their safety is not respected. The burgeoning movements that call for divestment from policing, reallocation of resources, and the prioritization of people who most often experience the dehumanizing processes of surveillance, policing, and incarceration stand as exemplar cases. Librarians, library staff, and library patrons are collaborating to support one another as they learn how to create meaningful change in LIS. The inclusion of these movements, their contexts and shaping theoretical positions, and their implications in the LIS classroom will ensure that the next generation of library and information professionals will enter the profession equipped to continue this vital and necessary work.

Endnotes

1 For example, see Chase (2019), which concerns whether or not an armed chief of police should frequently lead storytimes, despite a patron's complaint.

2 The majority of quotes that accompany this essay are from testimony at the meetings of the Los Angeles Public Library Board of Library Commissioners that took place throughout 2020. Date and timestamp information have been removed in order to better anonymize identities of those quoted.

3 According to Erica Meiners, who discusses this phenomenon as a "nexus," "[t]he term 'school-to-prison pipeline' aims to highlight a complex network of relations that naturalize the movement of youth of color from our schools and communities into under- or unemployment and permanent detention" (2011, p. 550). This phenomenon is so widespread in the United States that there was a congressional meeting on the topic in 2012 (Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline).

4 Los Angeles (California) Unified School District

5 The full quote is, "because white men can't police their imagination black men are dying."

6 Criminalization involves the confluence between the dehumanizing processes of racism and systemic oppression that work to adhere to perceived criminality and threat to comport, physical embodiment, ways of speaking and language, and other contextual ways of being (Dwyer, 2015; Puar, 2007; Smiley and Fakunle, 2016; Ritchie, 2017).

Acknowledgements

Appendix A: Additional Comments from the LAPL Board of Commissioners Meetings

Patrons and Volunteers

"If you continue to have the police in our libraries, then what you're telling us is the only people who can use the library are white, wealthy people who are safe with police around."

"[w]hat will happen, not if, but when, if there continues to be presence of armed police in our libraries, an incident happens in a library. What will happen if, at some point, an armed policeman murders someone in a library? That is a real risk, that is an incident that is, by what we have seen in terms of what happens when there are armed policemen in public spaces is very -- I think not just possible or likely, but almost certain."

"[t]he police officers who are also stationed in these branches do not create a safe environment. Armed or otherwise, their mere presence is meant to intimidate the library's unhoused patrons through the threat of force."

Librarians

"I have worked at every level in LAPL … and have experienced harassment and threats at every level, and at each experience my safety was dependent on my colleagues and how prepared we were because calling security or LAPD did not resolve the issue. Oftentimes, my concerns were invalidated and they said they couldn't do anything about it because they did not witness the harassment or what I reported, so it was discounted, and so really my safety was dependent on my colleagues. … we really need to reimagine safety and also provide assistance for people that experience houselessness because a lot of security language has been directed towards those people.

I am all for finding new ways to invest in safety and security because any time I've dealt with any police officer that is not one of the three that are usually in our branch, they are hostile towards our unhoused patrons, they are hostile towards people who might be struggling from mental illness, and I don't feel safe. I've been stalked through the branch, I've been stalked through the parking lot after dark, I've been held hostage in the branch by people banging on the windows, and LAPD doesn't seem to care. … and if there's a better way to do this and get response times for our patrons and for us I'm all for it."

From outside of the LAPL Commission Meetings

"This summer, there were uprisings in St. Louis and the same officers who were going out and pepper spraying people at night came in the next day to work with us. They don't recognize us, but we recognize them [and] it's definitely disheartening to come to work and see people who terrorize you outside of work. (In, Kuziez, U. (2020). Libraries for All asks for community support to create safe and just libraries. *Parkway Pathfinder*.

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