# Public library and private space: Homeless queer youth navigating information access and identity in Toronto

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**Abstract:**

*This paper will examine the public library as an important space where homeless lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual, two-spirit, and/or queer youth seek shelter and information, but also as a place that challenges the endless work youth undertake to quietly pass as "not homeless." A description of their information practice will include a discussion of their perception that public library use signifies a failure on their part and will introduce the adaptive efforts youth undertake to create or gain entry into information space that either very publicly refutes their homeless identity or very privately allows them to pass unnoticed. As public libraries in large urban areas respond to the needs of homeless youth, it is important to ask how queer members of that population can be better supported through staff training and the strategic design and/or deployment of library services and space.*

**Keywords:** Information access, homelessness, sexual/gender minorities, libraries, failure

## Introduction

Finding homeless LGBTQ youth is the first challenge library staff face when working to understand how to respond to their information needs. Homeless LGBTQ youth may look and act just as their homeless, cisgendered, heterosexual peers: gathering on sidewalks, in coffee shops, and in public libraries. In many cases (if not the majority of cases) homeless youth will be indistinguishable from other young library users; youth who have safe, stable housing. There are few visible markers of sexuality, besides overt displays of affection. And trans identity may be invisible or hidden, especially in street contexts. Public libraries, as part of this street context, face the challenge of providing services in an equitable way to all people who come through the door. But this is difficult when the behaviour of "problem

patrons," as regularly reported in library literature (Kelleher, 2012; Ferrell, 2010; Westbrook, 2015), displaces or masks what pieces of LGBTQ identity homeless youth may be demonstrating. Supporting their access to information is difficult when they become just one more problem to resolve.

Globally, youth homelessness is a major problem (UNESCO, 2014). While infrequent population counts and varied definitions of youth homelessness make the comparison of numbers a report-worthy project in itself, population estimates in regions with high-income economies include 75,000 in the UK (Quilgars, Johnson, & Pleace, 2008), 1 million in the US (Kidd & Scrimenti, 2004) and 40,000 in Canada (Gaetz, Donaldson, Richter, & Gulliver, 2013), the geographic region that this paper draws from for the questions it raises. In the US, 15-40% of homeless youth self-identify as members of a sexual or gender-minority (Frederick, Ross, Bruno & Erickson, 2011) compared to only 3-5% of the general population (Ray, 2006). Data generated during the most recent *Toronto Street Needs Assessment* (2013) indicates that 21% of homeless youth in the emergency shelter system identify as LGBTQ although when taking into account a preference against voluntarily self-identifying as LGBTQ (Walsh, 2014) and the large number of hidden-homeless youth, the numbers are likely far higher (Homeless Hub, 2018). A subject and keyword search of "homeless" and "public libraries" in *Library & Information Science Abstracts (LISA)* (as an example of one prominent LIS database) returns more than 200 results demonstrating that the question of how best to respond to homeless library users is an element of public librarianship under examination. However, when combining this search with one inclusive of the experience of LGBTQ people, results fall to single digits. Public library researchers have demonstrated interest in understanding the information needs of queer youth; Mehra & Braquet (2011) is one early example. Yet, as research examining the needs of homeless library patrons is ongoing (Holt & Holt, 2010; Kelleher, 2012), the intersection of research that addresses homeless LGBTQ youth in the library is work that remains exceeding rare (Shelton & Winkelstein, 2014). This, despite the disproportionate representation of queer youth in the homeless population.

The lived experience of the general homeless youth population is difficult. But while homeless LGBTQ youth share these difficulties, the space they occupy appears to be far more dangerous. Homeless LGBTQ youth report higher instances of victimization, suicidality, addiction, mental illness, and a dependence on survival sex - "the exchange of sex for food, money, shelter, drugs and other needs and wants" - than their cisgendered, heterosexual peers (Walls & Bell, 2011). In an adaptive practice attempting to reduce risk, LGBTQ youth often hide their sexual or gender identity. But in this, they also must hide any information seeking, sharing, and use that might lead to their identity being discovered. And this adaptive practice is where public libraries come into conflict with the private information acts so essential to the welfare of individual lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual, two-spirit, and/or queer youth.

This paper will investigate the relationship homeless LGBTQ youth have with public libraries in a large urban centre paying specific attention to the public nature of the space and the private needs of this population of library users. It will then turn to a theory of information poverty as framed by Elfreda Chatman (1992) explaining why it is unlikely that homeless LGBTQ youth will reach out for information help in public libraries. Next, the paper follows homeless LGBTQ youth to two places they report as preferred public information spaces in the city, explaining how the visibility or presence of other homeless people in public libraries makes them undesirable or even dangerous. Finally, this work will turn to a discussion of

passing in street contexts and the work that public library staff already do and could do better to create a space where homeless LGBTQ youth can reveal the elements of their identity that are most in need of information support.

**Methodology**

Claims made in this paper are grounded in evidence generated through two processes. The first is a year-long ethnographic investigation and analysis of the information practice of homeless LGBTQ youth conducted between 2013 and 2014. While data collection was ethnographic, it was also exploratory. Robert Stebbins suggests that "researchers explore when they have little or no scientific knowledge about the group, process, activity, or situation they want to examine" but believe that interesting discoveries are contained within that gap in knowledge (2001). Exploratory ethnography employs the technique of beginning with broader phenomena and descending to the topic – seeking to understand information in context. To achieve the discovery of something that might benefit from an eventual library-based intervention, the study employed participant observation at a weekly drop-in program for homeless LGBTQ youth and one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with eleven queer, trans and/or two-spirited youth who are homeless or who have been homeless or underhoused in the past. In addition to observation at the drop-in, fieldwork was also conducted in the 38,647 square meters of public library space that fills the Toronto Reference Library and in a relatively small corner of Toronto's 159,979 m2 Eaton Centre shopping mall. Analysis of interview notes, interview transcripts, field notes, and a photographic inventory followed a coding and "memoing" technique as outlined by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995). An initial report of findings was completed and submitted as a Master's thesis in the fall of 2014.

While the initial report deployed the voices of homeless LGBTQ youth to frame their information practice, a second more recent evidence gathering process has led to the production of this current work. A re-examination of the findings of the 2014 study included further pressure applied to reported information experiences that were only briefly touched on in the earlier work. That pressure has come through a literature review incorporating queer theory, information science, and performance studies and has resulted in something new that takes one element of the practice of homeless LGBTQ youth – a preference for non-public library information space – and considers it further.

**Information practices and homeless LGBTQ youth**

Very briefly, "Information practice" is a theory of the way individuals seek, use, and share information in specific contexts (Savolainen, 2007, pg. 121). And it is how this paper will frame what homeless LGBTQ youth report doing as part of their everyday information lives. Specific practices reported in the 2014 thesis were many but include: peers and street outreach staff as key sources of information, social media as a tool for curating identity and maintaining familial relationships, creative writing and record keeping to push back against transphobia and homophobia, and internet as private space and even home. A full list of observed or reported practices is available from http://uoft.me/outinthecold or can be requested by contacting the author.

**Public libraries and homeless LGBTQ youth**

One succinct definition of "public library" is a "... local centre of information, [that makes] all kinds of knowledge and information readily available to its users." Drawn from the 1993

*IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto*, this description maps well on to North American perceptions of public library space and services. For instance, the Pew Research Centre reported in 2013 that "Americans are most likely to say they strongly value having access to books and media; having a quiet, safe place to spend time, read, or study; and having librarians to help people find information. " The IFLA/UNESCO definition highlights a space that is "local" and supports access to "knowledge and information" and members of the US public agree: a public library is a "safe space" in their community where "librarians help people find information." And yet, it is the very public nature of this cherished information space that constrains the information practice of some of the most vulnerable library users. Privacy is infrequently possible. Computer work stations face outward. Borrowing material may require reading preferences to be observed. Exhaustion or intoxication may lead to youth being asked to leave this public space before satisfying their information need. The Oxford English Dictionary describes experience that is "public" as being "open to general observation, view, or knowledge; existing, performed, or carried out without concealment, so that all may see or hear" (OED Online, 2007). And it takes little imagination to connect this definition of "public" with "problem" behaviours of homeless youth and the challenging work homeless LGBTQ youth undertake to manage the intersections of their identities in public space. It is interesting to note that the observation made at the end of the previous section – that LGBTQ youth living in street contexts must hide any information seeking, sharing, and use that might lead to their identity being discovered - is an observation mirrored more than 25 years ago in the important work of information scholar Elfreda Chatman (1992).

In her research with elderly women living in a retirement home, Chatman saw how residents often hesitated or refused to request information from staff if they felt that information sharing would endanger their status in the institution. "Deception" was the name Chatman gave to acts of false information practice, acts intended to keep other residents and staff from gaining a full picture of the individual's particular needs. In the context of a retirement home, this led residents to experience a form of information poverty that often had dire consequences. In unsheltered contexts, deception plays an important role in how LGBTQ youth navigate their information world. Chatman might agree that these youth also "engage in self-protective behaviours to keep others from sensing [their] need" (Chatman, 1996, pg.197), all in "an effort to appear normal…" (ibid.), whether cisgendered, heterosexual or stably housed. These behaviours and efforts have implications for those public library staff working to support LGBTQ youth, especially for those who are homeless.

If the public nature of public libraries is a barrier homeless LGBTQ youth choose not to cross, or choose to cross in limited, managed ways, it is important to investigate where this population is turning to carve out the privacy they need. Understanding these preferred spaces may provide public library staff with ways of moving forward or outward to ensure that access to a library's important collection, services and space can be reestablished.

**Hybrid information space**

Locating or making information space that either very publicly refutes their homeless identity or very privately allows them to pass unnoticed, is everyday work in the lives of homeless LGBTQ youth. In their failure to find private space in public libraries, these youth cleverly turn to semi-public or privately controlled "public" spaces where they are able to perform a more useful, if not authentic, identity.

Sociologist Sam Perry describes a 24-hour coffee shop, popular with homeless residents of an unnamed American city, as "urban hybrid space" (2012). These hybrid spaces, he contends, "serve dual roles as legitimate business establishment and homeless habitation or hangout" (ibid.). While his attention followed the lives of homeless adults seeking temporary shelter, the ethnographic process that gave way to this paper (Walsh, 2014), found that the primary, or perhaps preferred, hybrid space homeless LGBTQ youth seek access to information was the Apple Store at Toronto's Eaton Centre. Two things happen when these youth exit the street and cross the invisible threshold of this privately controlled "public" space. The first is that they drop the constant conceit of "street-involved" – where gender and sexual non-conformity is necessarily hidden – and become consumers of information, of products, of services that are transformative. Even just for the five minutes or five hours they are welcome in the space (and extended observation of one location indicates Apple employees are not overly concerned with a 5-hour visit), they access a powerful kind of privacy provided by a dream. It's not specifically Apple's "Think Different", although if you dig far enough you may find that idea somewhere in the infrastructure of what homeless LGBTQ youth (and everyone else) knows of the brand. These youth report being "gadget freaks," wanting the newest product, feeling at ease in a place where batteries are always fully charged and data fees are forgotten or just not imagined (Walsh, 2014). It's a fantasy that isn't unique to homeless LGBTQ youth, but one that powerfully speaks to the expectations (Canadian) society has of queer folk – that they are more Mac than PC, that they are creative, productive in the economic sense, and that they are somehow neutral, unthreatening, neutered. Queer youth need to perform to these expectations if they are to benefit from the exceptions society is willing to make.

There is something in Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* that gets at this from the back end. In public space, "imagining existing alternatives to hegemonic systems" (Halberstam, 2011, pg. 89), not some "fantasy of an elsewhere"(ibid.), is difficult. Homeless LGBTQ youth are not easily afforded opportunities to tune into a disregard for dominate conceptions of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. and to imagine. Embracing failure would be an act of courage that we have no right to ask, as much as we might wish. In place of this beautiful failure, homeless LGBTQ youth navigate towards a privacy that allows them to pass unnoticed or to be invisible in the spaces that those who embrace failure or succeed in their disorientation (to breath over Sarah Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*, 2006) could never be. The Apple Store is a fantasy that permits moments of relief as the cool air washes over their bodies.

Another space in the urban landscape where homeless LBGTQ youth turn when turning away from public libraries is the academic library. Where the OED describes "public" as a space "open to general observation, view, or knowledge; existing, performed, or carried out without concealment, so that all may see or hear" (OED Online, 2007), the semi-private (open but closed but open) space called "academic" is described as "...relating to, or characteristic of an educational institution or environment; concerned with the pursuit of research, education, and scholarship; scholarly, educational, intellectual" (OED Online, 2011). What is missing in this definition that is so relevant in the context of work towards building privacy in a life lived in public, is that academic spaces are primarily populated by youth. For instance, close to 80,000 young people fill the University of Toronto's urban St. George campus each weekday of the academic session (September to May). While this paper does not draw on data generated through observation at the University of Toronto, homeless youth - LGBTQ or otherwise – likely find adaptive ways to employ library spaces and services at this institution. Behaviours that could lead to homeless youth being asked to move on from a public library –

sleeping, loud conversations, relatively poor hygiene, even substance intoxication – may not stand out in a busy and vibrant youth space. In fact, homeless LGBTQ youth may be students themselves attempting to balance the challenges of a university education with unstable housing and food insecurity (Keohane, 2016; Hughes et al., 2011). On a university campus and in the stacks of an academic library, homeless LGBTQ youth find an opportunity to pass into the privacy of the crowd.  This is made even easier if their network of friends and contacts share the credentials required to log onto a "public" computer at one of the many wired cocoon-like workstations filling academic library space (see Walsh, 2014).

**The endless work of passing**

Passing as a consumer of luxury information technology at the Apple Store or passing as a member of a student body at a large university library, is easy work for youth who are in constant negotiation of and/or with the spaces they pass through each day. In street contexts, LGBTQ youth work their identity unceasingly. In one moment, straight, cisgendered, competent in conversations with other homeless youth or the adults who prey on the homeless. In the next moment, an unremarkable twenty-something sitting in a coffee shop waiting for a friend. And in another more rare moment, a queer or trans or two-spirited person doing something, anything, that might give the game away.

"Passing" is a contested term in the lives of trans and queer people, as it may be is in the lives of people of colour, people with disabilities, people struggling with mental illness, and others who are read and understood in specific ways before they are given a chance to speak their own experience and identity. In a recent *Slate* article (2017), trans author Evan Urquhart explains:

> The commonly used term for a trans person being correctly gendered by strangers is "passing." But passing is a contested term because it contains a contradiction: It implies there's something false or surreptitious about being seen as our authentic selves. ... Some trans bodies are more easily read correctly than others, some trans people have more resources to put into changing their bodies than others, and some trans people are more successful at accepting their deviations from cisgender expectations than others.

The verb "passing" places responsibility on the individual in question. The verb "to read" suggests that gender or sexuality, and perhaps identities associated with poverty or wealth, are the product of another. Urquhart's writing is a reflection of their experience and commentary on what they see in the trans community in the United States. And Urquhart's sense of passing contributes to a long conversation both in scholarship (Pease, 1996; Nagel, 2000; Yoshino, 2007, etc.) and in LGBTQ space.

This issue of identity "passing" or identity "being read" is raised as an acknowledgement that there may be – or likely are – instances in this paper where a person's identity is represented in ways that they may not agree with. Specifically, homeless LGBTQ youth are individuals who may not see themselves in this description of their experience with libraries, with gender, or with the street. These observations are derived from a process - or two processes as indicated above - and it is those observations that generate the qualities of the experience that has been described.

**Conclusion**

While the many youth who contributed their stories to the ethnographic project in 2014 demonstrated a pattern of preference for non-public library space, they also were very clear about the things they value in large urban public libraries. One youth called Luther explained:

> I don't just go to the library for the computers. I'll go there sometimes on a Friday night if I'm not doing anything. I'll read a magazine. I'll read a book. I'll listen to music. I find that my library is my escape from my girlfriend. I can't get myself into trouble and she's not worried about me cheating on her.

In a descriptive fieldnote detailing a somewhat casual conversation at the drop-in meal program where participant observation primarily took place, a young homeless man who struggles with addiction:

> ...talked about spending much of [that day] at the library at Young and Bloor. Five hours in total. He [said] that the Toronto Reference Library is one of the main places he goes during the day. When I asked what he liked most about this branch he said the computers, then laughed and added, "It's also warm in winter and air conditioned in summer. What's not to like?"

And yet, the public nature of public libraries makes passing as a "normal" patron, a patron not part of the "problem," difficult or impossible for homeless LGBTQ youth. Returning to the *IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto* (1993), the goal of public library work is to provide services "on the basis of equality of access for all, regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social status." But this may be more difficult than is indicated by the effortless way this goal has been expressed.

In the introduction, public libraries were described as sometimes signifying failure for homeless LGBTQ youth. To understand this, it is useful to look at discussions of stigma as experienced by homeless people. While poverty carries its own associated stigmas, homelessness benefits from additional hurt and harm. An influential 1997 study demonstrated that the general US population "expresses a significantly greater social distance" with an individual described as homeless than one described as poor (Phelan, Link, Moore, & Stueve, pg. 331). That distance is keenly felt by the general homeless population, as it is felt by homeless LGBTQ youth who report being embarrassed by their housing status (Walsh, 2014). But as practitioners of flexible identities, surveyors of unfriendly spaces, and seekers of many of the same consumer products and experiences as youth who are not homeless, homeless LGBTQ youth report a preference for spending time away from other homeless people, preferring to keep a significantly greater social distance from them, than from the non-homeless. That is to say, just as residents of San Francisco are reported as wanting homeless people gone from their libraries, and public libraries there are investing in defensive architecture to discourage loitering (Gee, 2017), homeless LGBTQ youth prefer the Apple Store and academic libraries because of a perception that the public libraries are where the homeless go. Public libraries, for them, signify failure. Whether this is internalized oppression or a practical way of managing how they are being read at any given moment, or a hopeful act, it is part of the adaptive information practice that helps youth appear as they wish or, in certain moments, to disappear at will.

Homeless LGBTQ youth need to step in and out of identities to access services, to take part in street economies, to make contact with family and old friends, to build romantic relationships, to gain educational opportunities, to sleep in public space, to cool down during a heat emergency or to warm up during an extreme cold weather alert. And there are a number of ways that public libraries can support this work.

1. Reach out or go out to your local homeless youth community. If, as indicated in Toronto's 2013 *Street Needs Assessment*, 21% of youth in the shelter system of a large North American city identify as LGBTQ, outreach to shelters is outreach to homeless LGBTQ youth.
2. Hire young LGBTQ staff to lead that outreach. Homeless LGBTQ youth trust information that has come from peers and queer programming staff.
3. Build empathy for the experience of homeless LGBTQ youth within your organization through staff development and training.
4. Think about ways of building private information space in public libraries.
5. Talk to homeless youth and, in a professional context, become their friends. Homeless youth are hungry for kindness and few professionals are better suited to demonstrate interest, respect, and thoughtfulness than librarians and library staff.

This list should continue. And I hope it will as you take pieces of what you've read back to your organizations and raise this discussion in the exciting and important spaces and that public libraries hold.

## Acknowledgments

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