Winnipeg’s Millennium Library Needs Solidarity, Not Security

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Abstract

We argue that Winnipeg’s downtown Millennium Library’s aggressive and invasive security screening practices set a dangerous and exclusionary precedent for Canadian libraries. Drawing on community-led librarianship literature, as well as anti-racist and criminological scholarship, we argue that implementing security screening in libraries flies in the face of best practices for public libraries, creates opportunities for racial bias and harm, and does not make patrons or staff safer. We trace the multiple ways that securitization creates harm for different marginalized communities. We then argue that Millennium Library is not alone in facing this risk and that solidarity and mobilization by other library workers will be necessary to stem the tide of securitization.

Keywords

community-led librarianship; public library securitization; racialization of space

1. Context

Many library systems work to balance staff safety and security, and the general consensus in the library community in Canada has been that invasive security screening including searches must be avoided. Overzealous security measures are detrimental to the trust relationship between libraries and their communities, especially
as they disproportionately affect racialized and otherwise vulnerable patrons. Despite this, on February 25, 2019, the downtown Millennium Library branch of the Winnipeg Public Library (WPL) instituted new security measures (Greenslade & Thompson, 2019; Hoye, 2019a; Plett, 2019; Winnipeg Public Library, n.d.-a). The first of their kind in Canada, the new security procedures involve patrons lining up to go through airport-like security to enter the library: their bags are searched, a metal detector is passed over their bodies, and any items against the policy are confiscated. To date, such items include a lot of scissors (Crabb, 2019), but also safety-capped needles, drumsticks, knitting needles, and bike repair tools. Some patrons are turned away by Security, while others self-select out; marginalized patrons have literally been pushed out into the cold.

2. Rationale

Library administrators said they were concerned about an increase in violent incidents in the Millennium Library (CBC News, 2019b). WPL consulted with police and GardaWorld, the private security company contracted by Millennium, and arrived at the solution of increasing the security presence at the front entrance and mandating bag checks and full-body metal detector scans. The library initiated no public consultation, and library advisory board members and city councillors were not included in the decision-making process.

Investigative journalism has found that these perceptions of increased violence are not supported by evidence. Journalist James Wilt’s analysis showed that there has not been a significant increase in incidents, and he argues that “this is an utterly manufactured crisis” (Wilt, 2019). CBC did a freedom of information request for the incident reports and found that for the vast majority metal detectors would not have had any effect (Glowacki, 2019).

It is true that some workers have felt unsafe in their workplace; indeed, this is a major factor in the decision to bring in these security measures. We believe people should feel safe in their workplaces. But we also know that racial fears underpin many of the claims of unsafety at Millennium. It is a space where patrons are likely to be Indigenous or newcomers, while library workers are overwhelmingly white settlers from higher socio-economic brackets (Galvan, 2015; Honma, 2005; Hudson, 2017; Kumaran & Cai, 2015; Schmidt, 2019a). This tension and the narrative of violence coming from particular sources create racial discomfort, but discomfort is not the same as being unsafe (DiAngelo, 2018). As a profession, library workers need to grapple with the ways race and Indigeneity shape workplace comfort and responses, and address the ways that whiteness privileges some people’s safety at the expense of others.

There is also a large amount of evidence that these types of security measures are not best practices (or even better practices) when it comes to community safety (Jennings, Khey, Maskaly, & Donner, 2011; Mayer & Leone, 1999; Saarikkomäki & Kivivuori, 2016). Research has shown that increased securitization leads to increased criminalization—not higher incidents of crime, but higher incidents of people, most often BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) communities and youths, being marked as deviant and thus brought into contact with the criminal punishment system.
Rather than making communities safer, such security measures introduce opportunities for racial bias and harm, and make people less safe (Dobchuk-Land, 2019).

Research shows that police and private security firms unfairly target and respond with violence to racialized and otherwise stigmatized people (Diphoorn, 2017; Kempa & Singh, 2008; Markwick et al., 2015). For refugees and other members of the public who have experienced state violence, checkpoint setups are retraumatizing and provide a significant barrier to entry. For survivors of sexual violence, having hands passed over their bodies can be triggering and retraumatizing. For many communities who have been targeted by police, including LGBTQ2S+ people, the presence of police-like guards encourages those people to avoid screening, creating barriers to accessing the library and its programming. For people with disabilities and people with health concerns, screening creates invasive and time consuming barriers, at which health supplies and accessibility aids could be confiscated or damaged. For Indigenous survivors of Residential Schools, engagement with uniformed authorities compounds anxieties and feelings of being unwelcome and at risk of institutional violence. Furthermore, militarized checkpoints are more likely to escalate and exacerbate drug-related altercations. Meth-induced psychosis is more likely to be triggered through confrontation and the creation of stressful situations (Dobchuk-Land, 2019). In each of these cases, security screening pushes people away and creates the conditions for staff and patrons to be made less safe by escalating tensions before any incident has occurred.

Libraries serve patrons with mental illness, another vulnerable population frequently unfairly targeted by security forces. Despite the fact that people with mental illness are much more likely to be the victims of violence than the perpetrators, they are often viewed as inherently unsafe, which can create friction with security forces (Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies, 2010). Mental illness issues and the biases against people experiencing them intersect with poverty and homelessness. In recognition of this, and in a marked contrast to the tack taken by WPL, in 2015, Edmonton Public Library partnered with researchers at the University of Alberta to better understand the needs of their communities and workers (Marshall & Knoch, 2018). The recommendations were not to install visible security barriers (which may be particularly prohibitive for patrons with mental illness), but instead to train library workers to better understand the natures of mental illness, to provide trauma-informed services, and to establish tactical communication and de-escalation techniques. Instead of requiring library workers to be experts in this area, Saskatoon recently announced free walk-in counselling for people provided by Family Services Saskatoon (CBC News, 2019c). This type of partnership—inviting experts and other social services in, rather than expecting library workers to provide an ever-expanding range of services they may not be fully trained for—is a crucial way to reduce the burden on library workers to provide all services (Ettarh, 2019), without reducing access.

Libraries all over Canada have found ways to increase the safety and well-being of library workers without excluding large groups of patrons. Halifax Public Libraries, for example, offer food and drinks in the morning and have addressed spatial issues (Hoye,
By welcoming the community in and helping different patrons feel like they belong and are valued, the library sets itself up as a community space where respect is given and received. Welcoming and providing comfort are actually ways to make people feel more relaxed and can reduce tensions that may lead to violence. Common solutions, which do require commitment and support from the municipality, include many of those recommended by Steve Albrecht (2015): consistent code-of-conduct enforcement, frequent de-escalation training, building a culture of safety at all levels of staff, spatial replanning, and adequate staffing to attend to matters on the floor.

3. Resistance

While the security measures were passed without public consultation, there was immediate public pushback. People recognized (even if those making the decisions did not) that these measures were exclusionary, harmful, and a threat to public libraries.

Anti-poverty groups, anti-racist activists, housing activists, regular patrons of the library (Rae, 2019), harm reduction experts, academics (CBC News, 2019a), and advocates came together to have community consultations (Caruk, 2019), inter-agency meetings, read-ins (Khan, 2019b; Tkatch & Thompson, 2019), and read-outs (Khan, 2019a), to write open letters (Selman, 2019), petitions, and letters to the editor, and to provide evidence-based arguments why this policy will disproportionately affect racialized people—particularly Indigenous people, refugees, people in poverty, and unhoused people—and degrade public services for all.

We see in the resistance to the security measures at Millennium some hope for a different path. A broad array of organizations and individuals demonstrate the varied potential of allies of the library, should it expand its mandate to include the diverse constituencies already in its midst. But an added danger of securitization—that it puts these constituencies on an oppositional footing with libraries’ agendas—erodes the potential solidarity libraries will need as they face an environment of austerity and imagined scarcity.

4. Dangerous precedent

These decisions did not happen in a vacuum, and there is a lot of additional context undergirding this decision. You might remember Winnipeg as Canada’s “most racist city” (Macdonald, 2015, para. 8). Additionally, there have been significant cuts to healthcare in Manitoba, including the closing of the downtown Urgent Care facility. The province and city cannot agree on building a much-needed drug treatment facility, and there is no safe injection site in the city. The provincial government has dramatically reduced the amount of subsidized housing available. Additionally, reflecting an approach that looks to police as the solution to every problem, the City of Winnipeg has massively increased the policing budget at the expense of social services (Marcoux, 2016). WPL itself has been significantly understaffed since the early 2000s (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2018).
As unique as some of these factors may be, the larger context of racism, austerity, and precarity is not just a Winnipeg problem (Klimchuk, 2019; Robinson, 2019). Decreased funding for social services, a more precarious library workforce, and increased pressure to securitize affect all of us and our libraries, and we fear if this dangerous precedent is allowed to stand in Winnipeg, we will see it in other communities in Canada. If this kind of securitization becomes normalized, the threat to libraries is real: the securitization changes the character of the space, it mediates the relationships between workers and patrons, and it makes us all less free in public space. Libraries have always been embedded within dominant social relations (Bourg, 2015; de jesus, 2014; Seale, 2016), constrained by the politics and interests of the powerful. Yet there has also always been resistance, with critical, progressive, "whole person", and community-led approaches all seeking to explore ways to destabilize hegemonic and oppressive factors in librarianship.

Millennium’s security policy actively undermines trust and reciprocity with the affected communities, running counter to a shift in the field towards community-led librarianship, which values building power for the communities our libraries serve (see CLA Community-Led Library Service Network, 2018). This kind of visible and active barrier undermines all of the ways the amazing workers at WPL have built programs, connections, and trust with many different communities in the downtown core (Winnipeg Public Library, n.d.-b). Because the securitization process lacked transparency, communication, and community consultation, the knee-jerk solution of pulling guards from the floor to staff a station at the door is unlikely to create a place that feels welcoming and safe for many, especially the understaffed and under-supported frontline library workers. We should deeply question a solution that touts its cost effectiveness at the expense of real investment in staffing, training, and other best practices that do not unfairly exclude and stigmatize patrons.

One of the factors at play, too, is the immediate involvement of the City’s public relations machine, which has led to a doubling down and illusion of uncritical support for the initial plan, despite its many flaws. This is partially a result of WPL’s being deeply nestled in the bureaucracy of the City and the public relations ethos of never admitting wrong, but it is also deeply related to how public library workers have little in the way of protection for intellectual freedom. Speaking out against operational decisions, especially controversial ones, is hard in any workplace, but for WPL staff, it has become untenable. Library workers have been presented with only one choice—these security measures—and thus the discussion has narrowed to a single option for a complex problem. Many people agree that something must be done to promote worker and patron safety without agreeing that this is what it should look like.

5. Library Solidarity

Intellectual freedom is a fraught concept in libraries (Popwich, 2019; Shockey, 2016). Often, we as a community think of concepts of free speech applying (or not) to our patrons. The authors of this piece have the privilege of belonging to academic institutions where academic freedom has a more robust understanding; we are presumably protected by backlash from our employers if they do not appreciate a critical
position we take. We do not want to be in a position of speaking for the library workers at Millennium, as our position is necessarily from the outside. However, having the protection of academic freedom means that we also feel an obligation to be critical of policies that are deeply exclusionary and harmful. This is not always easy territory to navigate, and library communities need to have sustained engagement on the issue of how we can practice—and protect—criticality and social justice in all areas of library work (Nicholson & Seale, 2018).

The groups and individuals responding to the policy have been diverse. Some have coalesced into a group called Millennium for All, but many independent individuals and organizations have also responded with solidarity, outreach, and building and sharing horizontal power. People from within the library field have also written to the City, its Community Services Department, and WPL to express their opposition to the measures. Jane Schmidt’s (2019b) letter made waves because there was a realization that the library community is paying attention to this issue. Former members of the CLA Community-Led Library Service Network and others have generously and transparently shared their library security policies.

This is an opportunity for us to build solidarity—across provinces, across the academic and public sectors—that is broad and deep, because it is highly likely this type of securitization of libraries will continue if we do not actively oppose it. We need to recognize that library workers cannot be the sole providers of social services to vulnerable populations, while also realizing that our access policies, first and foremost, should not be exclusionary. If you are concerned about what a policy like this might mean for your library and your most vulnerable patrons, speak out against it now, and start building horizontal solidarity with other groups serving your communities.

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