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Downturn Puts New Stresses on Libraries

By [SUSAN SAULNY](#) and KAREN ANN CULLOTTA

ARLINGTON HEIGHTS, Ill. — The public library here had just closed its doors one evening in December when two homeless men who had been using the stacks as shelter from the cold got into a fight on the outside steps.

What began as bickering took a violent turn when one of the men pulled out a knife and stabbed the other six times, leaving him bleeding beside the book drop.

Like libraries across the country, Arlington Heights Memorial had strived to keep pace with the changing times, ensuring its relevance in the digital age by becoming something of an indoor town square, and emphasizing that its money-saving services catered to the community's needs.

These days, however, community need reaches far beyond reference help — and in many libraries, it is turning a normally tranquil place into an emotional and stressful hotbed.

As the national economic crisis has deepened and social services have become casualties of budget cuts, libraries have come to fill a void for more people, particularly job-seekers and those who have fallen on hard times. Libraries across the country are seeing double-digit increases in patronage, often from 10 percent to 30 percent, over previous years.

But in some cities, this new popularity — some would call it overtaxing — is pushing libraries in directions not seen before, with librarians dealing with stresses that go far beyond overdue fines and misshelved books. Many say they feel ill-equipped for the newfound demands of the job, the result of working with anxious and often depressed patrons who say they have nowhere else to go.

The stresses have become so significant here that a therapist will soon be counseling library employees.

"I guess I'm not really used to people with tears in their eyes," said Rosalie Bork, a reference librarian in Arlington Heights, a well-to-do suburb of Chicago. "It has been unexpectedly stressful. We feel so anxious to help these people, and it's been so emotional for them."

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Urban ills like homelessness have affected libraries in many cities for years, but librarians here and elsewhere say they are seeing new challenges. They find people asleep more often at cubicles. Patrons who cannot read or write ask for help filling out job applications. Some people sit at computers trying to use the Internet, even though they have no idea what the Internet is.

"A lot of people who would not normally be here are coming in to use the computers," said Cynthia Jones, a regional branch manager in St. Louis.

"Adults complain a lot about kids just playing games and you know, 'I need to do a résumé, or 'I need to write, I need some help,' " Ms. Jones said. "There's a bit of frustration."

Ms. Jones instructed her staff to tread carefully. "You don't want to upset people," she said. "You don't know what might set somebody off."

Paul LeClerc, president of the [New York Public Library](#), said résumé writing had become a major use of library computers, and every librarian in the system had received training in how to better assist patrons conduct job searches. The 40 million visits to New York libraries over the past year, he said, is the greatest ever in a 12-month period.

Here in Arlington Heights, newly homeless patrons are showing up in their business suits, said Paula Moore, the library's director.

"They are living in their cars after losing a job they had for a number of years," Ms. Moore said.

The [American Library Association](#) does not keep statistics on incidents in and around libraries, but anecdotal evidence from around the country suggests that some libraries are struggling with their newfound popularity and the social ills that can come along with it.

In Los Angeles, the police say the [Central Public Library](#) has become a magnet for thieves, and that, excluding shoplifting at stores, there were more thefts of personal property at the library last year than any other location in central Los Angeles.

"We hope things get better," said Lt. Paul Vernon, a spokesman for the Los Angeles Police Department, noting the difficulty of policing libraries. "The library is a place where people tend to congregate, and from a public and government standpoint, you can't really restrict people."

In Sacramento this year, two branches of the public library temporarily stopped accepting cash as fines for overdue books, after thieves struck three times since June — in one instance, taking off with a safe filled with money.

In Lynchburg, Va., a gunman shot a man outside the public library on a Monday afternoon in late January. The victim, who survived, staggered into the library bleeding and looking for help. Since then, an off-duty police officer has been hired by the library for extra security.

And in Quincy, Mass., where a man was recently arrested in the library and charged with assault and battery with a dangerous weapon, among other offenses, a police officer on beat patrol now walks through the library during operating hours.

Though homelessness is not new to Arlington Heights, security at the library has been tightened since the stabbing. (The man was charged with attempted murder, and the victim survived.) Although such violence is unusual, a library patron, Judi Crawford, said the scene around the building still made her uncomfortable.

“I don’t like my 16-year-old son to study at the library at night anymore,” Ms. Crawford said. “If he is studying here, I make sure he stays inside until he sees me pull up, and he can just run out and get in the car.”

Other things have changed at the library here, too.

It has tried to anticipate the new needs of its neighborhood. Next to its welcome desk, it created a job-search desk, and it has recruited volunteer professionals to review résumés, set up a support and networking group for the unemployed, and assembled a Web site offering the best of its online resources.

Officials said the library was experiencing double-digit increases in the circulation of DVDs, CDs and books on tape. The library’s many children’s programs and cultural arts events are also filled to capacity, reflecting a growing demand, linked to the economy, for free entertainment.

With an estimated 2,500 patrons visiting the library every day, employees must now park at a parking lot at a nearby church.

“When you walk by our new job-search desk, you see people in line and even waiting on the benches for assistance,” said Ms. Moore, the director of the [Arlington Heights Memorial Library](#).

A therapist is planning to give a workshop at the library called “Finding Hope After Losing a Job,” while also offering advice to library employees who are increasingly being thrust into the role of first responder to emotionally distraught patrons who view them as confidantes.

“I’ve had people come in and talk for hours,” said Barbara Vlk, a librarian specializing in business at Arlington Heights. “More and more people are in need of help and direction.”

Malcolm Gay contributed reporting from St. Louis.

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