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Georgia’s Libraries and the Needs of Patrons Experiencing Homelessness: An Exploratory Study
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ABSTRACT
This paper presents a sample survey of Georgia libraries’ services for those experiencing homelessness, conducted in the spring of 2020 before COVID-19 closed libraries across the country. It examines previous research on best practices to aid those experiencing homelessness and former attempts to implement these practices. From these practices and experiences the survey questions were designed. The questions are as follows: what barriers exist, if any, at these libraries that might make it difficult for those experiencing homelessness to use library services; do these libraries follow best practices standards in their services that help all patrons feel welcome using the libraries facilities; what correlation exists, if any, between a library’s services and its location; in what ways, if any, do their websites aid people experiencing homelessness and educate the public about the needs of people in their community? The findings show where Georgia public libraries excel and ways they might wish to improve, as well as offering suggestions to all public libraries. It also opens the door for more extensive studies to be conducted in the future.

KEYWORDS
homelessness, Georgia public libraries, library barriers

INTRODUCTION
“If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you’ll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really can understand a person until .... You climb into his skin and walk around in it” (Lee, 1960, p. 36).

This study attempts to apply Atticus Finch’s advice to his daughter in two ways: to decipher what those experiencing homelessness might need from the public libraries and to determine whether patrons experiencing homelessness can benefit from a short stay at the library or a quick visit to the library’s website to find available services.

This task presents many challenges. The biggest challenge is trying to understand the needs of such a diverse population and accepting that some things can only be understood by those that experience them. This makes including programs and services for special populations a continuing endeavor. Also, homeless people are not one group but members of many subcultures and special populations that share the misfortune of being currently without a physical place to call home. Their needs are numerous and varied. Therefore, this project critiques ways libraries help and ways they make this help visible with the understanding that there will always be more that can be done and improved.

Purpose Statement
This exploratory study examined 10 public libraries in the state of Georgia, both physically and virtually through their websites, to determine whether they meet the current best practices in welcoming and aiding any person experiencing homelessness who wishes to use the facilities and services.

Research Questions
R1. What barriers exist, if any, at these libraries that might make it difficult for those experiencing homelessness to use library services?
R2. Do these libraries follow best practices standards in their services that help all patrons feel welcome using the libraries facilities?
R3. What correlation exists, if any, between a library’s services and its location?
R4. In what ways, if any, do their websites aid people experiencing homelessness and educate the public about the needs of people in their community?

Definitions
Best Practices: A combination of theory and real-life testing. These tested practices are considered most effective when executed correctly (ODLIS, 2019).
Convenience Sampling: A form of survey sampling where the selection is not based on probability but on the close location of the sampling, often used for pilot surveys (Lavrakas, 2008).
People Experiencing Homelessness: Children, adults, or families who lack a permanent and/or adequate place to live. This includes, but is not limited to, those living in hotels, cars, abandoned buildings, overcrowded in another’s residence and homeless shelters (Georgia’s Mckinney-Vento Program, 2015).
Rural: more characteristic of the country than of the city; an area situated in the country (OED, 2020).
Safe Place: an official designation, marked by a yellow triangle, where youth know they can go and be safe. Many libraries have officially registered and qualified for this title (National safe place network, 2019).
Suburban: area right outside the city; residential community near but separate from the city (OED, 2020).
Urban: a city as opposed to the countryside (OED, 2020).
Webometric: The quantitative study of information gathered from a website or websites and used to further research in the information sciences similar to bibliometrics (Thewall, 2012).

Delimitations
This was an observational study of public libraries in the state of Georgia and a webometric study of said libraries’ websites. The study was limited to the selected libraries during a one-month period. Observations were limited to a checklist of best practices and not observed interactions of people or interviews of any library employee or patron.

The study includes only the selected public libraries and only their services offered at their actual site and/or website. It does not examine library outreach programs aimed at people experiencing homelessness other than to note that their facility and/or website advertised such services; nor did it observe librarians, library users, or people in the library space.

Assumptions
It was assumed that the library websites viewed in the study were both up to date and accurate. It was also assumed that the visits to the libraries represented an average day in the library and the observations were an accurate representation of that library in general.

Importance of Study
In the state of Georgia, approximately 9,499 people may experience homelessness on any given day (United States Interagency Council on Homeless, 2019) and many of these people will gravitate to libraries where there is a controlled temperature, chairs, bathrooms, and materials to pass the time. It is only right and natural then to try to offer programs, materials and services that might help them in their day-to-day struggles and ultimately help provide a path to a physical home.

The American Library Association set up a task force for this purpose and libraries strive to implement their guidelines. The state of Georgia has a higher rate of homelessness than most states around it (United States Interagency Council on Homeless, 2019). Georgia also contains one of the biggest cities in the south (Atlanta) surrounded by smaller, more rural areas, which offer a variety of demographics. This made Georgia an appropriate case study on how urban, suburban, and rural public libraries, under the same mantel, interact with people experiencing homelessness.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Homeless Population and Libraries

In 1990, the American Library Association published policy number 61 (later changed to ALA Policy B.8.10 Addressing Poverty, Economic Inequality, and the Responsibilities of Libraries) as their statement on the needs of the economically disadvantaged and the libraries’ duties toward them. Among the list of objectives included educating the public, removing barriers that hindered use of the library, adjusting services and policies to better fit their needs, working with the community to increase help, and increasing training for library staff in this area (ALA, 2010). Even today, any best practices typically fall into at least one of these categories and though the official title does not specify patrons experiencing homelessness, they certainly meet the criteria. The ALA, itself, referenced this policy as part of their Hunger, Homeless, and Poverty Task Force formed in 1996 (ALA, 2012).

Since adoption, it has been a long and slow struggle for public libraries, not only to implement policy number 61, but to accept that it is even worthwhile. According to Ayers (2006), the ALA’s directive met with resistance from many libraries. Librarians, motivated by concerns from other patrons, created policies that limited or completely kicked out patrons experiencing homelessness. Some of these patrons in return tried to sue the libraries, but in general, the courts upheld the libraries’ right to enforce their rules, rules that often seemed aimed at people experiencing homelessness (Ayers, 2006).

Gehner (2010) quoted from a colleague’s paper declaring that libraries were not about giving people a place to loiter, shower, or change their clothes among other things. Gehner used this quote to demonstrate that this was still the attitude of some of those in the library profession. His article pleaded for understanding and changes with four sections he felt needed improvement: removing barriers, looking beyond the poverty to the person, learning the reasons for homelessness, and working on inclusion. Gehner quoted often from policy 61 and appeared to be familiar with ALA’s guidelines. The year 2009 seemed to be a time when the tide was turning with more articles embracing the philosophy of ALA’s policy 61. Scholarly literature from this time seemed to follow a certain theme. Wong’s (2009) article is a typical paper from this time in that he pleaded for compassion and gave general ideas for changes by pointing out exemplary case studies. Standout points he brought up included educating librarians about those experiencing homelessness to alleviate some of their concerns and having consistency in library policies, so no one group was singled out.

Terrile (2009) focused more on the plight of the young, by pointing out studies showing children from families experiencing homelessness falling behind academically and discussed ways libraries could specifically help with this. Terrile also focused on library outreach programs being implemented by libraries such as the Charleston County Library whose employees visited local shelters to do book talks, helped youth set up a library at the facility and helped those living there register for library cards. Collins, Howard, and Miraflor (2009) looked at just one model library. San Jose Library not only offered outreach programs at shelters, but they also promoted their regular programs to patrons experiencing homelessness and offered once only workshops, believing this would work best for someone who may not show up for a continuing workshop. They also offered computer training and free consultations with volunteer social workers and lawyers. Five years later, Bardoff (2015) looked at hurtful policies and legal cases that showed resistance to people experiencing homelessness in the libraries. Bardoff presented the cause of social justice and pointed out that all these negative policies block the right to information from those living with homelessness.

Giesler (2017) interviewed librarians about their experiences with patrons experiencing homelessness. His study continued to show that individual public libraries were not implementing ALA’s policy 61. For example, the Chicago Public Library posted signs to prevent people experiencing homelessness from loitering in the building or bathing in the bathroom. The article also pointed out positive examples such as Dallas Public Libraries “coffee and conversations” meetings between patrons without homes and library staff. However, while Gielser interviewed librarians who were frustrated with these patron’s body odors or the way they hogged the computers for hours; he also discovered librarians who sincerely wanted to help and who were trying to encourage patrons experiencing homelessness to use the library’s programs. Gielser theorized that better educated staff and more communication would help
An article by Zhang and Chawner (2018) gave a unique perspective on the situation, as the authors approached it from a point of view other than the librarians. They interviewed frequent users of library facilities who were also experiencing homelessness. This approach gave librarians an understanding of what patrons felt they needed from the library. Patrons enjoyed the use of computers, the movie night geared towards them, and the safe warm building. They wished for lockers, showers, and more food. They valued the friendliness of the library staff highly, just someone to smile kindly at them made a difference. One thing this study brought out was the variety of opinions and wishes of those experiencing homelessness. These are people coming from different places with different needs that make a library’s ability to serve them challenging but not impossible.

Looking at the literature as a whole, it seems that while libraries were slow to embrace the policies put forth by the ALA, little by little they have started to accept, not only that libraries should serve those without permanent homes, but also that this service needs to be different and beyond what other patrons receive. How well they are implementing this new philosophy remains to be seen.

Studies Using Similar Methodology

Although Beckett-Willis’ (2017) webometrics study was on public library programming for teens instead of people experiencing homelessness, the methodology of the study was used as a blueprint for the webometric portion of the current study. Beckett-Willis counted the clicks of the mouse needed to get to teen programing from the homepage, as information should be easily accessible and not take more than a couple of clicks to retrieve it.

Beckett-Willis (2017) discovered that of the 52 websites examined in the study only 16 websites (30.7%) promoted teen programming. Of the websites that promoted teen programming, almost half (43.75%) could be reached from the homepage with one click, while more than a third (37.5%) of the websites offered teen programming that could be reached with two clicks from the homepage. Only three websites had teen programing on their homepage.

Estrella’s (2016) study is similar to this paper’s study as it looked at four U.K. libraries, examining how well they served the various groups of people experiencing homelessness. It examined more areas than this paper’s study, looking at the libraries’ outreach programs and interviewing patrons and librarians, but it surveyed a fewer number of libraries. However, its use of webometrics and observational surveys are tools used in this paper. Furthermore, while Estrella’s stated purpose was to compare UK libraries to those in the United States, it also noted effective strategies that would benefit services for people experiencing homelessness in general.

Estrella’s (2016) study also showed that the libraries examined served the public’s needs by informing the public of where they could go to get services such as food and shelter through posters and flyers. Three of the libraries examined offered a compromise to those who had no fixed address by accepting a shelter’s address or something similar and all libraries charged fines.

METHOD

This study took the policies, programs and ideas that best implement the ALA’s policies from the articles discussed previously and made a best practices checklist (Appendix A). Ten public libraries in Georgia were selected by convenience sampling, as the Covid-19 pandemic meant libraries needed to be surveyed quickly before they temporarily shut down. For each library, a physical visit lasting about a half hour and an examination of the library’s website was conducted to see what items on the checklist the library followed.

The information was entered into an Excel spreadsheet to see how many of the libraries completed each item on the checklist. This information was then compared to the libraries’ locations to see if any patterns emerged between what best practices the library followed and its physical location. The percentage of people experiencing homelessness in each area was examined via Endhomelessness.org and compared to the other data (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2018).
Limitations

This study involved spending about a half hour at the library. While it was assumed that this would give a general idea of services to patrons experiencing homelessness, it was expected that services would be missed or unobserved interactions occurred that would have been useful to this study.

RESULTS

R1. What barriers exist, if any, at these libraries that might make it difficult for those experiencing homelessness to use library services?

Seven barriers were selected from the LIS literature on patrons experiencing homelessness (Figure 1). The barriers fell into two categories: the first group consisted of barriers that affected all patrons and the second category consists of barriers that, even if they apply to all, seemed to be targeting patrons experiencing homelessness. The first three barriers, whether to charge fines, ask for proof of residency, or require library cards or guest passes all fell into the first category. The second set of barriers forbids bathing in the restroom, carrying large luggage into the building, sleeping, or having offensive odors. These are behaviors frequently associated with people experiencing homelessness and uncommon in other public library patrons. In theory the policies are applied to all patrons, however, in practice they target people experiencing homelessness.

All ten (100%) of the libraries in the study charged fines for overdue and lost materials and all but one of the libraries (90%) required proof of residency to obtain a library card. The remaining library allowed patrons to use a shelter or group home as their residency. About half of the libraries examined banned offensive odors, bathing in the restrooms, and sleeping in the libraries. Only three of the libraries (33%) had rules about large bags and only one library (10%) required an ID before offering a guest pass to use the computer. However, only one library (10%) allowed use of the computers without a guest pass. Guest passes present a small barrier and are only necessary for the most crowded libraries; and even then, a time limit might be more effective.

Figure 1: Barriers for Patrons Experiencing Homelessness

R2. Do these libraries follow best practices standards in their services that help all patrons feel welcome using the libraries facilities?

A list of twenty examples of best practices that could benefit those who are experiencing homelessness was compiled from the relevant LIS literature (Figure 2). All the libraries offered arts and crafts,
programs for families with children, and audiovisual materials. Eight offered programming for those over eighteen, flyers and/or posters offering programming, and tax forms. Nine offered access to email. They also offered information on free services and made clear that their rules and policies apply to everybody. Unfortunately, some of the rules and policies, such as sleeping and bringing in large bags, do still single out people experiencing homelessness as they are the group most likely to break these rules.

A little more than half of the libraries offered youth programming, friendly librarians who greet patrons with a smile, and tutoring in a variety of subjects. Four of the libraries (40%) offered language help and day camps for youth and children, and three of the libraries (33%) had security guards, employment help, and library events where free food was served. Only one of the libraries (10%) had lockers for their patrons.

**Figure 2:** Best Practices that Benefit Patrons Experiencing Homelessness

![Figure 2](image)

### R3. What correlation exists, if any, between a library’s services and its location?

Figure 3 shows the percentage of best practices and barriers in areas where Georgia’s population of people experiencing homelessness is highest and lowest. The two libraries with the highest population of those experiencing homelessness in this study, Atlanta’s West End Branch and Martin Luther King Branch, all had security guards and friendly librarians. They all provided free food during events, arts and crafts, audio visual material and programming for families and adults, information on free services, posters and flyers advertising programming and events, email, and literacy tutoring. They all charged fines, but Martin Luther King also had posted rules about odors, baggage size, and bathroom use. They both stated that policies apply to all patrons. Neither library offered language or tax help.

Table 1 shows the individual libraries, their local environment, and the percentage of those facing homelessness in their community. Table 2 and 3 show how each of the individual libraries rated on best practices. Combining these data show how neither being an urban library or having a high rate of patrons experiencing homelessness prompts libraries to have security guards or free food at events as in both of these examples a suburban area library also offered these items. Barriers are also not defined by geographic location as two of the urban area libraries had less barriers than some of their suburban counterparts.

It does seem from the data that Atlanta city libraries offered the overall best practices for those experiencing homelessness. Pickens County, which of the two rural libraries had a higher percent of those experiencing homelessness, had more services geared towards this group. However, a few subur-
ban libraries, such as Alpharetta and Sharon Forks, were also excellent in this regard, while others suburban libraries had some of the lowest ratings. The data offers no conclusive evidence that the environment or percentage of those experiencing homelessness effects programming.

Policy barriers tell a slightly different tale, 100% of the suburban locations employed over 50% of the barriers. Both rural locations had less than 30% of the barriers in place and 50% of the urban locations had less than 30% of the barriers in place. One urban location (MLK) tied with a suburban location (Roswell) for the most barriers in place at 86%. MLK also tied for the highest percent of the population experiencing homelessness.

**Figure 3: Percentage of Libraries Using Best Practices**

![Percentage of libraries using best practices chart]

- Art and crafts
- Audiovisual materials
- Camps
- Easy access to computers
- Email and facebooks
- Employment help
- Fines
- Flyers and posters
- Free Food
- Friendly librarians (Smile)
- Info on free services
- Language help
- Literacy tutoring
- Lockers
- Programs for families for children
- Programs for single adults
- Programs for youth
- Programs for youth over 18
- Requires proof of residency for library card
- Rules about baggage size
- Rules about odors
- Rules about sleeping in the library
- Rules about using the public restrooms
- Policies state they apply to all patrons
- Security guards
- Tax forms
- Tutoring

Legend:
- <10 per 10,000 persons
- 10-50 per 10,000 persons
- >50 per 10,000 persons
### Table 1: Library, Environment and Percentage of Patrons Experiencing Homelessness

| Library                                      | County  | Environment | Persons affected by homelessness per 10000 persons |
|----------------------------------------------|---------|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Alpharetta Branch Library                    | Fulton  | Suburban    | 3.8                                                 |
| L.C. Anderson Memorial Library (Metter)      | Candler | Rural       | 5.3                                                 |
| Macon Regional Library                       | Macon-Bibb | Urban       | 5.3                                                 |
| Martin Luther King Branch Library            | Fulton  | Urban       | 65                                                  |
| Pickens County Library                       | Pickens | Rural       | 5.3                                                 |
| Roswell Norcross Branch Library              | Fulton  | Suburban    | 3.8                                                 |
| Savannah Bull Street Library                 | Chatham | Urban       | 35                                                  |
| Sharon Forks Branch Library                  | Forsyth | Suburban    | 5.3                                                 |
| Tucker-Reid Cofer Dekalb Library             | DeKalb  | Suburban    | 4.5                                                 |
| West End Branch                              | Fulton  | Urban       | 65                                                  |

### Table 2: Library and Barriers

| Library                                      | Fines | Requires guest pass for computer access | Requires proof of residency for library card | Rules about baggage size | Rules about odors | Rules about sleeping in the library | Rules about using the public restrooms |
|----------------------------------------------|-------|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Savannah Bull Street Library                 | X     | X                                       | X                                           | X                         | X                | X                                  | X                                      |
| Macon Regional Library                       | X     | X                                       | X                                           | X                         | X                | X                                  | X                                      |
| L.C. Anderson Memorial Library (Metter)      | X     | X                                       | X                                           | X                         | X                | X                                  | X                                      |
| Roswell Norcross Branch Library              | X     | X                                       | X                                           | X                         | X                | X                                  | X                                      |
| Alpharetta Branch Library                    | X     | X                                       | X                                           | X                         | X                | X                                  | X                                      |
| Sharon Forks Branch Library                  | X     | X                                       | X                                           | X                         | X                | X                                  | X                                      |
| Tucker-Reid Cofer Dekalb Library             | X     | X                                       | X                                           | X                         | X                | X                                  | X                                      |
| West End Branch                              | X     | X                                       | X                                           | X                         | X                | X                                  | X                                      |
| Martin Luther King Branch Library            | X     | X                                       | X                                           | X                         | X                | X                                  | X                                      |
| Pickens County Library                       | X     | X                                       | X                                           | X                         | X                | X                                  | X                                      |

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**Table 3: Library and Best Practices**

| Service                        | Savannah Bull Street Library | Macon Regional Library | L.C. Anderson Memorial Library (Metter) | Roswell Norcross Branch Library | Alpharetta Branch Library | Sharon Forks Branch Library | Tucker-Reid Cofer DeKalb Library | West End Branch | Martin Luther King Branch Library | Pickens County Library |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|
| Art and crafts                 | X                           | X                      | X                                      | X                               | X                         | X                         | X                             | X              | X                               | X                   |
| Audiovisual materials          | X                           | X                      | X                                      | X                               | X                         | X                         | X                             | X              | X                               | X                   |
| Camps                          | X                           | X                      | X                                      | X                               | X                         | X                         | X                             | X              | X                               | X                   |
| Email and Facebook             | X                           | X                      | X                                      | X                               | X                         | X                         | X                             | X              | X                               | X                   |
| Employment help                | X                           | X                      | X                                      | X                               | X                         | X                         | X                             | X              | X                               | X                   |
| Flyers and posters             | X                           | X                      | X                                      | X                               | X                         | X                         | X                             | X              | X                               | X                   |
| Free Food                      | X                           | X                      | X                                      | X                               | X                         | X                         | X                             | X              | X                               | X                   |
| Friendly librarians (Smile)    | X                           | X                      | X                                      | X                               | X                         | X                         | X                             | X              | X                               | X                   |
| Info on free services          | X                           | X                      | X                                      | X                               | X                         | X                         | X                             | X              | X                               | X                   |
| Language help                  | X                           | X                      | X                                      | X                               | X                         | X                         | X                             | X              | X                               | X                   |
| Literacy tutoring              | X                           | X                      | X                                      | X                               | X                         | X                         | X                             | X              | X                               | X                   |
| Lockers                        | X                           | X                      | X                                      | X                               | X                         | X                         | X                             | X              | X                               | X                   |
| Policies state they apply to all patrons | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Programs for families for children | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Programs for single adults     | X                           | X                      | X                                      | X                               | X                         | X                         | X                             | X              | X                               | X                   |
| Programs for youth             | X                           | X                      | X                                      | X                               | X                         | X                         | X                             | X              | X                               | X                   |
| Programs for youth over 18     | X                           | X                      | X                                      | X                               | X                         | X                         | X                             | X              | X                               | X                   |
| Security guards                | X                           | X                      | X                                      | X                               | X                         | X                         | X                             | X              | X                               | X                   |
| Tax forms                      | X                           | X                      | X                                      | X                               | X                         | X                         | X                             | X              | X                               | X                   |
| Tutoring                       | X                           | X                      | X                                      | X                               | X                         | X                         | X                             | X              | X                               | X                   |

**R4. In what ways, if any, do their websites aid people experiencing homelessness and educate the public about the needs of people in their community?**

None of the websites mentioned people experiencing homelessness in their meeting agendas or past minutes, as a subject for upcoming training or as a specific outreach program. None of the websites mentioned working with homeless shelters on their outreach section.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**
While there are many promising programs and practices at Georgia’s libraries, improvements can still be made; barriers between these libraries and potential patrons who are living with homelessness need to be eliminated if libraries wish to reach more of this special population. Libraries in Georgia may want to reconsider policies on sleeping, odors, and baggage size until the unlikely event that the problem truly becomes overwhelming, and then consider another solution other than banning the behavior. Bags can be checked and certain areas can be designated for research and study so that they are not used for resting. Rules about offensive odors, a subjective criterion, should themselves be banned. Whether it is intended or not, these policies center on patrons experiencing homelessness. The goal should be to make this special population feel welcome, not just tolerated.

It is worth noting that some libraries had these rules posted on their website but seemed to be tolerant of the actual behavior. At two different libraries, a patron was observed sleeping discreetly in a private corner and at another library a patron was cleaning up in the bathroom. These incidents may have been overlooked by staff or there might be an unspoken policy to only say something if another patron complains. These incidents show that libraries are tolerant of these behaviors in small doses. There are also ways to accommodate needs while still adhering to the policy. For example, one city library allowed patrons to leave large bags and garbage bags with the security guard at the entrance when the policy prevented these items from being taken into the library.

All but one of the libraries required proof of residency without alternatives for those who do not have a permanent residency. All Georgia libraries wishing to be more accessible could have some agreement with an organization such as a shelter or a group home to use their address as a place of residency. This policy should be on their website in the how to apply for a library card section and posted somewhere at their library. Librarians should be made aware of this option. Georgia libraries have services and materials that would benefit families and single adults facing homelessness, such as their free access pass to some of Georgia’s attractions; it would be a pity if those who need this service, and others services like it, do not have access to it.

All the libraries in this study fine patrons for overdue or lost materials, which may deter patrons from returning materials. Whether this is statistically true has been challenged recently (Marrocolla, 2018). Regardless, libraries should consider whether offering materials to those who might not have access to it in any other way is worth losing a few books along the way. Another alternative might be to do away with overdue fines but keep fines for lost or damaged material or not charge overdue fines for children’s books. The Savannah library offers a student pass that allows students to use their school ID as a library card and check out books and audiovisual materials. This pass also waves overdue fines. As the student pass would allow students who might be experiencing homelessness to have access to materials without worries about overdue fines, this might be something all Georgia libraries may want to consider offering to their patrons.

None of the libraries are a designated safe place though most of them have signs in the libraries warning about human trafficking with phone numbers that can be called. Safe Place offers help to teenagers in whatever crisis they are facing, and all the librarian need do is call the number when the youth asks for help and offer them a place to wait until help arrives. Libraries are ideal locations for Safe Place Havens and Georgia libraries should consider joining the program.

While Georgia libraries do not offer anything specifically for patrons experiencing homelessness, they do offer a wide range of programming for various groups. Georgia libraries excel in family and children programming. They offer classes and events, as well as arts and craft materials for use anytime. Their libraries offer books and toys attractively displayed with plenty of space for a family to read and otherwise entertain each other. The Georgia libraries in this study also offer programming to a lesser degree for all other age groups. Some libraries were weak on teen programming and teen sections, but it is understandable that budgets prevent spending in some areas.

These libraries could improve by offering tutoring classes in a wide variety of subjects. They might also offer more language and employment help, although some libraries do offer computer and English as a second language classes. This is an excellent help to immigrants and others who need to up-
grade their skill set but only half the libraries offer such classes.

Much of the programming offered is advertised on flyers or on the website. This might not be enough to inform those who do not have access to a computer outside of the library or do not want to approach the reference desk. Flyers could be placed in other areas (some libraries place them effectively at the entrance), and posters could be used more frequently. One of the rural libraries placed a video screen at the entrance of the library advertising upcoming programming events. This is a useful idea if wall space is limited.

Only the urban libraries informed their patrons where they could go for shelter, free hot meals, and legal aid. They offered information on free activities in the area and where one could go for more employment help or counselling. All Georgia libraries have people experiencing homelessness in their area, so all libraries that want to improve on services to this special population could offer what the urban libraries offer. It would not take much time to print a sheet with charities in the area that offer meals and then post it on the wall, but it and other similar information would be a great service to those who need it. It could also help make other patrons aware that people experiencing homelessness are a part of their community and have needs that the library can supply. While it is understood that libraries have limited budgets and different demographics and needs, all Georgia libraries should consider the Atlanta city libraries as a model in how to best help patrons experiencing homelessness.

This paper presents an exploratory study of libraries’ services to those experiencing homelessness; it surveyed a small section of libraries in Georgia. A larger study might reveal further strengths and weaknesses in serving those experiencing homelessness. Furthermore, a future study could also include in-depth interviews with librarians to get a better feel for their training and experiences.

Georgia is only one state and a more comprehensive study of libraries policies and programming regarding services for patrons experiencing homelessness in each state of the United States could give librarians a better idea of what is working and what is not and help to lay out more consistent policies and services. Granted this is ambitious but could be very useful in an area of library services that is still met with controversy. Further studies about the pros and cons of library fines could also bring about change that would help those who are wary about checking out books with the possibility of fines.

Finally, these studies were conducted a week or two before COVID-19 hit the United States hard and since that time many services have been dropped or gone virtual. It is hard to imagine that all will be as it was before when the pandemic ends. Financial restraints and fears of overcrowding will change programming in unexpected ways. However, this study offers information that could be pertinent in deciding what services and programming to offer, and a further, larger study following this model could discover even more. Libraries are entering an era where their services and compassion have gone from a perk to a necessity for those struggling with unemployment and financial difficulties up to and including those who are experiencing homelessness. In a post COVID-19 world, everyone will need to imagine walking in someone else’s shoes.

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Appendix A
Checklist for Observations

**Service Checklist**

Art and crafts
Audiovisual materials
Brochures about transportation and maps
Camps
Childcare
Easy access to computers
Email and Facebook
Employment help
Flexible hours
Flyers and posters advertising services
Food
Friendly librarians (smile)
Info on free services
Language help
Literacy tutoring
More security guards
Positive signage
Programs for families with children
Programs for single adults
Programs for youth
Programs for youth over 18
Safe Place logo
Showers and lockers
Social worker on staff
Tax forms
Tutoring

**Barriers Checklist**

Overdue fines
Restrictions on getting a library card
Rules about baggage size
Rules about odors
Rules about sleeping in the library
Rules about using the public restrooms
Appendix B
Checklist by Articles

Ayers, S. (2006). The Poor and homeless: An opportunity for libraries to serve.

Access to computers
Audiovisual material
Email and Facebook
Employment help
Literacy training
Programming
Removal of overdue Fines
Tax forms
Tutoring

Bardoff C. (2015). Homelessness and the ethics of information access

Positive signage
Removal of rules against body odor
Removal of rules on baggage size
Removal of rules on sleeping
Removal of rules on using the bathroom

Beckett-Willis, A. (2017). Teen programming on Mississippi public library websites

Easy access to computers

Collins L Howard F, & Miraflor A. (2009). Addressing the needs of the homeless: A San José library partnership approach

Arts and crafts
Childcare
Employment help
Flyers and posters offering services
Food
Info on free services
Language help
Literacy training
Programs for families with children
Programs for single adults
Programs for youth over 18
Social Worker on Staff
Tax forms

Estrella, D. (2016). No fixed abode: library services for the homeless and economically disadvantaged in the U.K

Brochures about Transportation and maps
Childcare
Employment help
Flexible hours  
Info on free services  
Removal of overdue fines  
Social Worker on Staff  
Staff training  

Gehner, J. (2010). Libraries, low-income people, and social exclusion.

Friendly Librarians  
Language help  
Positive signage  
Programs for youth  
Training for staff  

National Safe Place Network

Safe Place logo

Terrile, V. C. (2009). Library services to children, teens and families experiencing homelessness.

Arts and crafts  
Camps  
Flexible hours  
Literacy training  
Programs for families with children  
Programs for youth  
Removing overdue fees  
Removing restrictions on getting a library card  
Tutoring  

Wong, Y. (2009). Homelessness in public libraries

Access to computers  
Audiovisual material  
Email and Facebook  
Employment help  
Flyers and posters offering services  
Friendly Librarians  
Programs for families with children  
Removing barriers on body odors  
Removing overdue fees  
Removing restrictions on getting a library card  
Tax forms  

Zhang, H. & Chawner, B. (2018). Homeless (rough sleepers) perspectives on public libraries: a case study

Access to computers  
Email and Facebook
Employment help
Flyers and posters offering services
Food
Friendly Librarians
More security guards
Positive Signage
Programming
Programming for single adults
Removing restrictions on sleeping
Showers and lockers
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