

What Librarians and Mothers in Temporary Housing Really Think about Libraries

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Families experiencing homelessness are almost invisible in the public library discourse around outreach, youth services, and homelessness. With the rates of family homelessness rising since the COVID-19 pandemic, this study sought to explore whether beliefs about libraries were acting as barriers for librarians to find and serve families in temporary housing, and as obstacles for those families to access library services. Through 28 interviews conducted with youth services librarians from across the United States and 28 interviews with mothers living in emergency or transitional housing in the Northeast United States, this study found that while both groups hold generally positive beliefs about libraries, their expectations of and experiences in libraries often differed dramatically. Although both samples identified almost entirely as female, the stark racial differences and differences in educational attainment between the two samples led to very different experiences in libraries, particularly in adulthood. Most notably, while both groups generally see libraries as comfortable, safe spaces for reading and learning, the mothers viewed libraries with a sense of nostalgia and wistfulness, as places they did not have the luxury of visiting.

Mothers experiencing homelessness and residing in shelter settings are often subject to what has been described as “parenting in public.” As single mothers in environments with strict curfews and limited child care options, these participants had little time of their own. While they were knowledgeable about the services and resources libraries could offer them and their children, their lack of autonomy over their time and activities frequently prevented their visiting the library. Additionally, systemic barriers including difficulties getting a library card while in temporary housing, prior experiences of race-based harassment and discrimination, and lack of transportation added to the reasons most families were not regular library users. These barriers, experienced by many mothers in this study, were in opposition to the librarian participants’ understandings of the library as equitable spaces that are welcoming for everyone and further support the need for targeted outreach and relationship-building with service providers for families experiencing homelessness.