

Reducing book theft at university libraries

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Abstract

After the local press reported how a student stole books from the University Library and sold them on the online marketplace, eBay, it became clear that hardly any research had been undertaken into book theft at university libraries. This article puts forward some valuable recommendations that could be practically implemented, mindful of the dilemma of the juxtaposed needs of social inclusion and stock security.

1 Introduction

At the beginning of semester A, the local press reported how a student stole books from the University Library and sold them on the online marketplace, eBay, having foiled the security systems. Almost all of these missing books were latest edition, high demand texts that went missing over the 2006-07 academic year. The issue of book theft is complex, and the literature available is often contradictory, leaving libraries in an unenviable 'no win' situation where any potential solution contains inherent faults. SCONUL (2003, 101) recognises that 'there is an established market for the stolen items, and they usually retain their value'. Book theft is identified as the most common crime in libraries, which has been on the increase for many years (Sewdass et al, 1995).

2 Causes of Crime

According to Weiss (1981), pressure for academic success is a factor in increasing book theft among students. Roberts (1968) concluded in his four-year study of library crime that a high rate of book theft occurred in libraries with relevant and sought after material. There is also some evidence that offenders are young, predominantly male, second-or third-year undergraduates, and book theft is usually carried out during the afternoon or evening of semester periods (Sewdass et al, 1995). Boss (1984) contends that policies and procedures may cause anti-library attitudes which may produce an adverse effect where patrons rebel against perceived restrictions and steal books. Jayaram (1988, 138) in his study on the needs and attitudes of student library users, discovered that in some instances the

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extended hours coupled with the ease of access also make the library 'a particularly attractive setting for potential offenders'. Ungarelli (1973, 155) argues that the high loss factor of library materials is due to the physical arrangement of the library building where control of the exit is difficult, stating that in some cases where work stations or study desks are far from the stacks or shelving, and in addition, compact shelves, and limited space between the aisles, all provide ideal conditions for book theft. Weiss (1981) identifies economic and financial factors as major contributors to the theft of library books.

3 Perception

Lincoln (1984, 9) argues that there is a perception by many potential thieves and vandals that the library is a 'safe target', with 'good pickings' and a relatively low possibility of getting caught. Johnson (1981, 2) argues that most students view book theft only as an 'academic crime' rather than a 'real crime'. Arguably, there may also be a perception on the part of higher education students of the library as an infinite resource, since the introduction of tuition fees in the 2006-07 academic year (under the Higher Education Act 2004). Associated with this speculation, students paying increased fees may acquire a sense of ownership over library stock.

4 Changing culture and the dilemma of social inclusion

Balancing the changing needs of students (including the challenges of widening participation, changing expectations and new approaches to education and studying) with stock security is increasingly difficult: 'The key to protecting a collection from vandalism or theft lies in getting the right balance between access and security' (Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries (CMAL), 2003, 21).

5 Recommendations

Addressing the dilemma of social inclusion and stock security in today's libraries is not an easily achievable task. The causes of crime are diverse and book theft cannot be totally eliminated. Arguably, imposing security regulations in a library to reduce book theft sits uncomfortably with the philosophy of widening participation but shrinking budgets during the 'credit crunch' require some form of action. However, there are several measures which could be practically implemented as part of a crime prevention policy. Clearly formulating such a procedure would involve cleverly balancing the relationship between social inclusion and enforcement of regulations. Introducing measures like heavier fines and exclusion may well be counter-productive. As literature suggests that book theft is widespread, a broad range of measures aimed at all library users could raise security awareness and reduce book theft. Perhaps the most useful guide to book security is the mammoth Security in Museums, Archives and Libraries study conducted by CMAL (2003), which recommends a system of identification, monitoring and revision. Any steps to discourage book theft would need to be undertaken over a phased period; introducing different initiatives at separate times to produce a gradual, yet inevitable implementation that would not upset any customer-orientated service. The successful management of the apparent contradiction between enforcing rules against book theft and promoting social

inclusion may be achieved through effective communication. Accomplished either through customer service, signage and through marketing the service as a valuable provision worth supporting, could be a positive way of reducing book theft at university libraries. The following measures, while none are infallible safeguards against book theft, are important recommendations for university libraries:

- **Regular stock checks:** Whilst they are extremely labour intensive, regular stock checks to monitoring loss are the most effective method to identify missing items from the collection;
- **Security staff:** ‘In large institutions this means employing a team of guards or attendants to deter and detect the actions of the criminally inclined, and the entire team is constantly vigilant’ (CMAL, 2003, 21);
- **Library Security Officer:** This monitoring role could be recruited and selected from the existing pool of staff. Crime must be recorded on relevant forms and thefts ought to be reported to the police (CMAL, 2003). The role of the Library Security Officer could consist of:
 - carrying out risk assessments on items most likely to be stolen, such as high demand, latest edition texts
 - compiling crime statistics (such as completing the Crime Report Form)
 - monitoring the effectiveness of self issue
 - reviewing the effectiveness of relevant policy and procedures
 - setting up relevant meetings
 - monitoring ‘missing items’ on the library management system
 - involvement in stock checks

(Guidance on NVQs can be provided by The Cultural Heritage National Training Organisation (CHNTO).)

- **Clear written policies:**
 - Publicising and enforcing rules and regulations
 - Staff to be aware of the escalation procedure for students stealing books
- **Maintenance of security gates:** A disadvantage of electronic security systems located at exit points in the library is that they create a false sense of security, and detection can also be overcome by power failures, or by electrical or electronic faults (Sewdass et al., 1995). Their typical success is preventing the absent minded patron from taking books out of the library, or the novice thief. As Witt (1996, 45) freely admits ‘no electronic book theft detection system is foolproof’ and no security system can eliminate book theft. In electromagnetic systems, tagged materials can be ‘foiled by simply carrying a small magnet along with the sensitized materials through the sensing screens’ (Witt, 1996, 52). Aluminium foil can be used to ‘shield targeted materials from activating an alarm while passing through the sensing screens’, tags can

be easily peeled off, and electromagnetic alarms can be avoided by raising the sensitized item above the sensing screens (Witt, 1996, 52);

- **Short-loan:** Making short-loan books available over weekends if borrowed on a Friday evening during semester, to make theft less tempting;
- **Photocopiers:** Photocopying machines must always be in working order;
- **Extended library opening hours:** Literature suggests that most students prefer extended library opening hours because the library is the only building that is open after dark and on weekends within universities;
- **Bag checking:** According to CMAL (2003), bag searching acts as a deterrent and heightens security awareness and they suggest that bag searching is lawful under resurrected anti-terrorism laws! I discovered that out of 36 HE libraries, 15 (41.66%) searched bags or forbade bags entering the library, 14 (38.88 %) only checked the bags once the alarm sounded, and 7 (19.44 %) occasionally checked bags;
- **Assessing student needs:** It is important to continually review student library needs;
- **Enquiry sheets:** When a student mentions to a member of library staff that a book is missing from the shelves but is 'checked in', a record could be kept of the item's author, title and barcode in case it has been stolen. This 'missing item' could be checked later in the day, and be reported to the aforementioned Library Security Officer as part of an ongoing risk assessment;
- **Radio Frequency Identification (RFID):** Use of RFID tags means that regular stock checks can be processed relatively quickly by scanning bookshelves (Butters, 2006). Admittedly RFID can be an expensive investment and a compare and contrast exercise still has to be carried out with the library management system to identify missing items;
- **Clear signage:** this could inform students that bags may be checked and that it is forbidden to remove unauthorised items from the library. Signage intended to be both protective of the University's assets whilst encouraging a safe, welcoming environment that is fully inclusive could manage the difficult balancing act between security and inclusion for an HE institution benefiting from widening participation;
- **E-Books:** By increasing the amount of e-books, especially high demand, latest edition texts, book theft may be reduced by transferring a 'high risk' physical item into an electronic version that cannot be illegally removed from the premises.

Other recommendations include competitive insurance, use of lighting, reviewing methods of display, ensuring that electronic security systems function properly, reader identification, control of entry, tagging, visible staffing at high-risk areas, use of recordable CCTV, position of CCTVs, effective access control, an effective lone worker policy, and good fire evacuation and Health and Safety procedures.

6 Conclusion

Just how much money is lost owing to book theft at university libraries is unknown. Unquestionably, introducing measures like stock monitoring, security assessments, bag searches, and appointing library security officers are culturally sensitive in widening participative environments. While research suggests that no easy solutions to combating book theft exist, much of the research is several years old, and while some of the theories are still current, further research into the practicalities of crime reduction into libraries needs to be undertaken. Clearly empirical research genuinely to understand book theft at university libraries is unexplored, highlighted by the fact that the research for this article was predominantly gathered from sources about the public library sector. Integral to any further study to reduce book theft at university libraries is understanding student perception. The speculation that some students steal books because they pay high tuition fees and feel they already own the books, is un-researched. Attempting to recognise why students steal from university libraries would be the foundation of any stock security policy, and a large-scale study of the sector may be required to offer guidance to libraries wishing to reduce book theft. Whether book theft in university libraries can be reduced implementing the wide range of recommendations mentioned in this article, while successfully balancing the juxtaposed needs of social inclusion and stock security, requires further investigation.

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