

# ARRESTED AT THE LIBRARY

## Policing The Stacks

TITLE

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Date Due	Borrower's Name	Date Returned
Aug 6	Wanda Allen	Aug 6
May 3	K. Gently	May 3



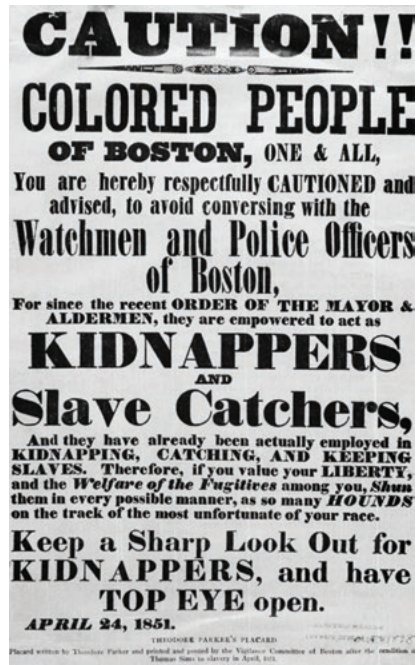
GRAPHIC DESIGN BY MICAH BAZANT





In 1783, Charleston, South Carolina established a City Guard "that patrolled as a company, wore muskets and swords, and was tasked with breaking up slave gatherings and cutting down on urban crime" (Shirley and Stafford, "Where do the police come from?"). The first public libraries in the US began to proliferate following the Civil War ("First public libraries"). The mission of the two institutions, the police and the library, has often been at least nominally at odds. Libraries disseminate information and educate the public, while police are often tasked with censoring books and repressing ideas deemed dangerous by government leaders.

Nonetheless, police historically have often worked in libraries and/or collaborated with library professionals. A journalist in Chicago in 1891 reported that when boys



went to the public library after school at 3:30, they were watched by a policeman "who sat in a conspicuous position and swung his cane."

Libraries still today use police to enforce rules and to harass and eject marginalized populations considered disorderly. Police, in turn, have accessed library resources to help them target and prosecute groups deemed dangerous.

For example, libraries allocate substantial portions of their budgets to paying police for security services; in Los Angeles, the library security budget ballooned from \$1.1 million in 2013 to \$10.4 million in 2021. Many libraries have also made users create personal accounts to access internet and computer services, specifically to ensure that law enforcement can identify users when investigating crimes. And both police and libraries collaborate to legitimize each other in the name of community outreach and social stability.

## Policing Libraries

Almost from their beginnings, libraries relied on police for rule enforcement. When the Boston Public Library opened in 1854, police were

used to verify the identities of would-be readers who could not provide the name of a guarantor. Those readers would naturally have been less respectable and less well-off. In 1961, more than a century later, the police in East Orange, New Jersey, were responsible for collecting overdue books and enforcing fines. Police conducted late night raids, arrested delinquent patrons, and put at least one in jail overnight. Littleton, Colorado, was still arresting people for overdue materials like DVDs in 2009 ("Return Library Books").

Public libraries, as public spaces, could be sites of theft or interpersonal violence. Police are sometimes called to arrest people accused of crimes on library grounds. As one early example, police in San Jose, California, arrested a man in



1914 who allegedly assaulted girls in the public library.

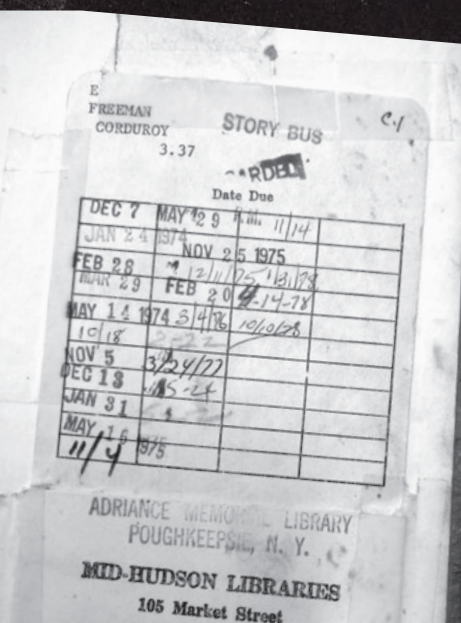
In 2016, the director of the Ann Arbor District Library in Michigan said that police regularly walked through the library checking people's names to prevent drug use in the facility.

As the effort to police drug use shows, libraries attract many people and many groups who are considered less respectable or undesirable. Librarians have often relied on police to remove them. In 1877, for example,



police evicted homeless and poor people from the Indianapolis Public Library. Patrons in the Boston Public Library in the 1890s complained that homeless people often rested by the warm radiators in the lower hall. In subsequent decades, it has been a common practice for librarians to involve the police in removing homeless individuals from libraries, but this action went largely unnoticed and unmentioned.

Finally, a federal judge in Newark ruled in 1991 that people cannot be kicked out of the library for being homeless (Hanley, "Libraries Can't Ban the Homeless"). However, in practice, police still regularly evict homeless people from public libraries; Theo Henderson,





host of the podcast *We the Unhoused*, reported, for example, on police telling him to leave when they found him sleeping in a Los Angeles library in the late 2010s. Other groups have also been targets of policing in the library. In 1953, Atlanta conducted a sting operation in the library, installing two-way mirrors in the restroom to surveil gay men under the guise of enforcing lewd conduct laws; twenty-eight people were arrested and

barred from ever using the library again. Similarly, in the Boston Public Library in 1978, police arranged a sting and arrested 105 men for "soliciting homosexual encounters." In 2016, a security officer at a branch of the District of Columbia Public Library asked a woman to remove her hijab in the library; the incident resulted in substantial protest ("Officer Asks Woman to Remove Hijab").



## **Police and Segregated Libraries**

For decades, many libraries, especially in the South, were segregated, and police would arrest Black people who used the building or accessed books (Summers, "Bodies of Knowledge"). The writer Richard Wright, for example, living in Memphis, Tennessee in the 1920s, could not get a library card, and when he got a white man to help him borrow books, he was terrified he would be discovered (Black Boy).

During the Civil Rights Movement, Black people protested at libraries as at other segregated institutions, and as at those other institutions, police were called in to suppress and remove demonstrators. In 1961, nine Black college students in a local NAACP

chapter were arrested for trying to desegregate the Jackson Mississippi library. That same year, a young Jesse Jackson and a handful of other students were arrested in the Greenville, South Carolina library; the town tried to close the library altogether rather than desegregate. In 1963, Black students spent the summer doing "read-ins" at segregated libraries throughout Columbus, Georgia; police repeatedly arrested them.

## **Libraries and the Expanding Carceral State**

Backlash to Civil Rights era gains and Black demonstrations led to Lyndon Johnson's War on Crime and an escalating investment in policing and incarceration. The ballooning of carceral systems and of police power

has affected libraries, which are increasingly pushed to police patrons, and have more and more options for doing so.

Libraries often embrace what scholar D. Forrest refers to as a “security ethos,” in which librarians and staff are encouraged to see their role as monitoring and reporting populations who are likely to display “suspicious activity.” Among the groups singled out for suspicion are people with mental illness, homeless

people, and young people—and often, despite official desegregation, Black and brown people.

The security ethos encourages librarians to see themselves as security personnel, and also encourages libraries to form close partnerships with police. Libraries often install bag checks and metal detectors which scan all patrons before they can access the facilities, as the Winnipeg Public Library did in 2017. In 2019, the Yellowknife





public library hired security guards to prevent fights. The library also began to close early on nights when police officers were in court and unavailable; the schedule of the library was tied to the schedule of law enforcement.

Increased security is supposed to increase the safety of patrons. Often, though, police and security guards may intimidate patrons, or actively threaten them. In 2017, an off-duty police officer working as a security guard in the Lakewood Public Library broke the jaw of a 17-year old girl who he was forcibly removing from the building. In 2019, a security guard at the DC Public library threatened to remove a patron unless she took off her hijab.

Libraries in the past have not been major targets of raids by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), but many analysts are worried that

this will change. Legally, ICE agents can enter public places like libraries and question people about their immigration status. ICE is not supposed to be able to access library records about patrons without a warrant. Libraries do not always protect marginalized patrons, however, and it is not clear how different libraries and librarians will react if they are pressured to aid authorities in targeting immigrants for arrest or deportation.

## **Libraries as a Police Resource**

Historically, police have sometimes used libraries to find information about patrons, and to target those patrons for their reading habits or research interests. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, the FBI had what they called a "Library Awareness Program"



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(Aycock, "Before book-banning wave"). This was a library surveillance program; agents would enter university or public libraries and demand that librarians reveal information about patrons who had read certain materials. At the University of Wisconsin, agents asked a librarian if a Soviet national had marked up a copy of the Russian-language paper *Pravda*.

Invading patrons' privacy is against the professional guidelines of the American Library Association "(ALA)". Nonetheless, some librarians and assistants cooperated with agents. The program seems to have tailed off in the 1990s following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

But in 2002, following the 9/11 attacks, Congress passed the Patriot Act, which, along with many other new powers, gave the FBI the right to get a warrant and then demand library records for any subject of a terrorism investigation (Egelko, "FBI snooping"). Librarians had to provide agents with records

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of identified patron book borrowing and internet use. Moreover, librarians could not legally tell patrons they were being investigated, or to talk about their own actions. Again, the ALA opposed the law, but despite its efforts, and those of other civil liberty groups, the Patriot Act stayed in effect for over a decade before finally lapsing in 2015.

## Community Coordination of Police and Libraries

Police and libraries have often held joint programs. Police officers have taught an anti-drug curriculum known as D.A.R.E. to students since the 1980s ("The History of D.A.R.E."). Law enforcement most frequently goes into schools to teach D.A.R.E., but

lessons are also conducted in public libraries (Smallwood).

Libraries will sometimes bring police officers in to read to children, or will create displays of books about police. Police are also sometimes invited to library events to provide them with education or training. In 1980, for example, Orange County library branches held seminars on sexual violence to which police were invited along with residents and victims.

Shared programs like these are conducted on the assumption that libraries and police are community institutions which can and should share values and information. People think police bring order and safety, so they treat their presence in the library as wholesome or natural.

# Abolish Police in Libraries

There have been librarians and patrons who have criticized collaboration between libraries and law enforcement. This criticism became more vocal during the 2010s as security measures in libraries, like metal detectors and bag searches, became more common (Robinson, "No Holds Barred").

The 2020 Uprisings in response to the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and hundreds more, inspired many to question the role of police in society, and encouraged a push against police presence in public spaces and institutions such as schools, parks, and libraries. Anti-policing librarians across







the country formed groups like The Abolitionist Library Association (AbLA) (Retta, "Getting Police Out of Libraries") and the Library Freedom Project to advocate for anticarceral library policies and practices. Anti-prison librarians urged libraries to redirect funds from policing to community resources, to reduce or eliminate police presence in libraries, and to eliminate

surveillance systems that law enforcement could access.

While some resistance exists in bringing law enforcement into the library, libraries and law enforcement have intertwined throughout their entire existence. It seems likely that at least in the short term, libraries will continue to find new ways to use police, and the police will continue to find new ways to use libraries.

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# Photos

Cover: Ms. Dorothy Cotton teaching a citizenship education class in Alabama in 1966. Bob Fitch Photography Archive, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

Page 1: Placard issued in Boston on April 24, 1851, by abolitionist Theodore Parker and the Vigilance Committee of Boston.

Page 4: Circa 1960s, Chicago Public Library's Traveling Branch.

Page 6: 1964, a Chicago Public Library reading room in a Park District fieldhouse.

Page 8: Reference librarian Susie Chen working in the Ann Arbor Public Library. Published in *Ann Arbor News*, July 20, 1980.

Page 10: Chicago Public Library circa 1980s to 1990s, researching the Harsh archives.

Page 11: A Clearwater, Florida police officer reading to preschoolers at Countryside Library.

Back cover: Library page Leo Verret sorts returned books sent to the basement of the main library by conveyor belt. New Orleans Public Library.









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