

## **Jack Spillane: The library has become homeless shelter's day room**

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The downtown public library in the city where I grew up was one of my favorite places as a kid.

I still remember my amazement the first time I ever went there:

You mean this is a place that has all these books, and I can pick one or two out and take them home with me for two weeks? You mean I can read that book for free and my parents don't have to buy it? And you mean that there are so many books here that it will take me forever to read them all?

I shudder to think of how the 6-year-old New Bedford boy who was sexually assaulted within earshot of his own mother at the downtown New Bedford library will remember one of his earliest library visits.

Suffice to say, it will be best if he doesn't remember at all.

The deeply disturbed 26-year-old man who took advantage of this boy is himself a victim of horrible sexual abuse and neglect. But what was he doing in the downtown library?

Well, part of the depressing answer is that the patrons from the nearby homeless shelters where he stayed spend a lot of time at the New Bedford book room.

There's a dirty little secret connected to the Corey Saunders case that all the librarians know, that the people who run the homeless shelters know, but that the public at large does not know: Urban libraries that are located near homeless shelters have, by default, become the day-care settings of choice for these homeless people.

And though not all homeless men are sex offenders by any stretch, a large number of sex offenders are, in fact, homeless.

And they're heading for the libraries to pass their days away.

Common sense tells you sex offenders have a difficult time finding a place to live, so they're often homeless, said New Bedford library director Steven Fulchino.

"There's probably a larger concentration of sex offenders around in places that have a shelter than in other places in the city," he said.

The directors of both the New Bedford and Fall River public libraries told me Friday that their staffs struggle every day over how to monitor troubled patrons.

The librarians know who the regular New Bedford sex offender patrons are, and they're checking all the time on new patrons like Mr. Saunders, Mr. Fulchino said.

"Lots of such folks come in and use the library," said Keith Stavely, the Fall River library director. "The vast majority of them are not criminals."

The problem, however, is that homeless and sex offender categories do overlap and librarians are equipped to handle neither.

Two reference librarians in New Bedford, who didn't want to give their names, said the job of a city librarian has become a discouraging one. They are called upon more and more to deal with people with serious problems.

"It's just the way the world has become," said one, looking weary.

Most homeless shelters, including Market Ministries — the shelter located just a block up from the downtown New Bedford library — make their clients leave their premises in the morning, unless the weather is bad.

But at a public library, the same people pass the day reading in the periodical room or surfing the Internet.

So, people who are not suitable to hang around a shelter all day are suitable to hang around a library, where children come and go?

Diane Bolton, a member of the Friends of the New Bedford Public Library, told me that there used to be missions and other places where homeless men could go during the day. Now, there's just the library.

Ms. Bolton believes the city should establish a modern day version of the missions to care for these men during the day.

"There's grant money around," she said.

Now, librarians have traditionally defended the right of everyone — including the homeless — to use a public library.

But Mr. Fulchino acknowledged that librarians have library work to do and can't closely monitor every adult who comes into the building with a child.

The city is racking its brains over how to deal with the problem.

It briefly considered using a library card to identify patrons as they come into the library, or reconfiguring the building so it's easier for librarians to monitor the nooks and crannies.

The New Bedford library has already installed closed-circuit cameras, and the city's legal department is examining whether the city can ban sex offenders (when the library identifies them) the same way they are banned from school property.

Sister Rose Gallogly, the director of Market Ministries homeless shelter, was said to be out-of-town yesterday and unavailable for comment. A woman who would only identify herself as "Debbie" and the shelter manager, said she was not allowed to comment.

In the meantime, the city and the library are trying to recover from a rape that took place in a public reading room within feet of the boy's mother and the librarians.

The New Bedford Free Public Library of 2008 is not the same as the orderly reading sanctuary where my mother dropped me off on Saturday afternoons some 45 years ago.

Today, there are any number of desperate characters walking the library's hallways. In truth, the place seems as much like a day room for the homeless shelters up the street as it does a library.

The only difference is that the library's overburdened staff is unequipped to deal with the disturbed visitors.

And they are being distracted from tending to the everyday patrons who just want to read a book in peace.

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