
Poverty and libraries

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Question of this presentation

Can libraries help people in poverty?

If so: Should they help them? And with what?

What is poverty?

1. Shortage / undersupply of material goods over a longer timescale.
 2. Always relating to the surrounding society.
(What are the possibilities for “normal” people in a society, what are the possibilities of poor people compared?)
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What is poverty?

3. Spheres of poverty: (1) income, (2) lodging, (3) health, (4) education (= possibilities to do something), (5) influence in the society
 4. Individual perspective: Poverty is a biography full of experiences of failures of plans, of narrow limits, of social vulnerability and material shortcomings.
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What do people in poverty want?

1. Live a good life.
 - a. Getting by, day by day.
 - b. Not get hassled (by institutions, the police, the society, other people etc.).
 - c. Being recognised as masters of their own life.
 2. Overcome poverty (at least for their children).
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What can be done?

That depends on how you - in this case, the library system - understands the roots of poverty. It's a matter of discussion.

(e.g. Historical structures? Lack of job opportunities? Constantly wrong decisions by the people in poverty? Bad luck? Product of a capitalistic society? Product of a not capitalistic enough society?)

What can be done?

- ❑ material help (e.g. providing reading material for leisure and / or education)
 - ❑ information about possibilities (e.g. job-market, self-employment, education)
 - ❑ support community organizing and discussion
 - ❑ inform the society on the realities of poverty
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Is technology the solution?

- ❑ That depends - again - on the discussion about the roots of poverty.

Is technology the solution?

- ❑ Technology is a tool.
 - ❑ Libraries can foster the access to technology.
 - ❑ Libraries can foster the knowledge of the use of technology.
 - ❑ Libraries can use technology to foster the access to knowledge.
 - ❑ But: That does not lead to less poverty straight away.
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What needs to be done?

- ❑ strategic decisions (on the library level and on a national level)
 - ❑ Should libraries help poor people (a) to get by and / or (b) to overcome poverty?
 - ❑ Should libraries help the society overcome poverty?
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What needs to be done?

- ❑ Recognition of the life and experiences of people in poverty.
 - ❑ Decide with those people, not above them
 - ❑ Help them to decide - together with the knowledge of the librarians -, what a library can do for them
 - ❑ e.g. is poetry a help, when you are poor?
 - ❑ e.g. is a “social space” wished for by the people in poverty?
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What needs to be done?

- ❑ An open debate on the role of (public) libraries in reproduction and / or overcoming poverty is essential
 - ❑ Such an debate has to be done on the local and national level
 - ❑ Up until now, such a debate is only rarely done (rudiments in GB, Canada, Australia, France)
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