The Problem of Theft in Libraries and Strategies for Prevention and Response

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Abstract

This paper examines the problem of theft in library and archival collections and strategies for managing the issue of library theft. Library theft is an ongoing problem which dates back to antiquity. Because they serve as storehouses of materials which are often of great value, libraries are vulnerable to theft. The sources of risk to libraries stem from the personal motives of their employees and users, the nature of the materials collected within them, the types of communities they serve, and the access they provide to both insiders and library users. Legal ramifications of library theft vary from state to state, but for cases prosecuted at the federal level, punishments can be severe. Various strategies exist for the prevention and detection of library theft, including professional guidelines, internal control procedures, building design, employee training, and ethical standards, and by employing such strategies and developing new ones, libraries can protect themselves against the harm caused by theft.

The Problem of Theft in Libraries and Strategies for Prevention and Response

The theft of library materials is a major problem confronted by libraries today. As many library employees and patrons discover every day, it is increasingly common to find empty DVD and CD cases littering library shelves and Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tags that have been removed from library materials with no sign of the materials with which they belong. Some library patrons sheepishly return DVDs they purchased on the street only to later discover, upon closer inspection, that the DVDs belonged to the local public library. High-profile cases involving employee theft of library materials valuing hundreds of thousands of dollars are numerous. The problem of theft is one that affects libraries and archives of all types. Clearly, the theft of library materials by both staff and users of libraries is a major, ongoing problem in libraries of all kinds, but many strategies exist to prevent and respond to library theft, and through awareness, application, and further development of such strategies, library personnel can help to mitigate the problem of library theft.

Historical Background

The theft of materials from library and archival collections is an ongoing problem which dates back to antiquity. Griffiths and Krol (2009) describe the historical background of library theft as one with roots in ancient Greece, where "Ptolemy II forced Athenians to lend him literary and philosophical Greek manuscripts for copying in exchange for famine aid," and ancient Egypt, where papyri were stolen from the library of Ramses II (p. 6). They go on to describe an 1897 incident in which two Library of Congress staff members were apprehended and tried for attempting to sell manuscripts stolen from the library, "[garnering] nationwide attention to the topic of library security at the end of the nineteenth century" (p. 6). On a larger scale, political motives have historically resulted in the theft of even greater numbers of

materials and even whole collections: Johansson (1996) relates tales of Alexander the Great's

personal library being taken as part of the spoils of a 168 B.C. war (p. 51) and the 1864 capture

and removal of Louisiana University's library by Union troops (p. 52); Schidorsky (2007)

recounts how Jewish public and private libraries were looted by the Nazi regime in Germany

starting in the early 1930s and through the end of World War II for the

Reichssicherheitshauptamt library collection. As Allen (1997) points out, "Where there have

been collections of important books, there have also been book thieves" (p. 30).

Unfortunately, the problem of theft is one that still plagues libraries, and in recent decades,

the problem has increased. Allen (1997) attributes this increase in theft to rising prices for rare books

and manuscripts on auction gallery floors and in booksellers' catalogs (p. 30). Regardless of the

causes or motives for these thefts, examples abound. Brown-Syed (1999) describes the high-profile

cases of Stephen Blumberg, an admirer of Victorian artifacts who stole over a million dollars' worth

of rare books from libraries throughout the United States and Canada in the early 1990s (p. 83), and

James Shinn, "a systematic book thief, whose list of desiderata was widely circulated in a

pamphlet known as 'The Shinn List'" and who was apprehended in the act of disposing of

burglary equipment in 1981 by Oberlin College's chief librarian William Moffett (p. 84).

Mounce and Mounce (2008) cite various incidences of recent thefts including one in which a

public library employee was charged in 2002 with the theft of over $43,000 worth of books and

audiovisual materials, another in which a university library employee was indicted for stealing

over $200,000 in fines for overdue or lost materials from 1997 to 2003, and a third in which a

library director in 2001 "pleaded guilty to stealing 417 library books and numerous audiovisual

materials" (p. 14). In 2005, the Gwinnett County Public Library in Georgia lost roughly 17,000

DVDs, mostly children's titles, to theft (Oder, 2005a), and in 2007, the Public Library of

Cincinnati and Hamilton County in Ohio lost 837 children's DVDs and video games, valued at $17,000, to theft by a local family (Oder, 2007).

The Vulnerability of Libraries

Because they serve as storehouses of materials which are often of great value and can be sold for a profit, libraries are vulnerable to theft. As mentioned above, Allen (1997) argues that there seems to be a correlation between the rising sale prices of rare books and manuscripts and rising rates of library theft. Griffiths and Krol (2009) describe several recent trends that play a seemingly important role in the increasing rate of library theft: the global marketplace provided by the World Wide Web, the appearance of specific information about collections on institutional Web sites, and the wide availability of information about the monetary value of items held within collections (pp. 6-7). The sources of risk to libraries stem from the personal motives of their employees and users, the nature of the materials collected within their walls—both physical and digital, the types of communities they serve, and the access they provide to both insiders and library users.

Motives for theft. The answer to the question of why library materials are stolen is complex and varies from case to case, but there are several obvious motives that bear mentioning. Mounce and Mounce (2008) discuss motives in the context of employee theft, but their analysis applies to theft by library users as well. The motives they highlight include the perpetrator's "lack of funds from legitimate sources," the presence of opportunities for theft due to lack of internal controls, a lack of choice on the perpetrator's behalf (i.e. the need to pay medical bills), or a sense of entitlement (p. 19). Surveying the professional literature, Griffiths and Krol (2009) enumerate several common motives for theft:

> Thieves steal to make money; they steal out of ignorance of the inconvenience and costs
>
> of replacement; they steal because of compulsive, anti-social impulses such as
>
> bibliomania; they steal to feed a private collection; they steal because they have
>
> knowledge about the location of valuable items. (p. 9)

They add that additional motives discussed by Berkeley in his introduction to the *International Reader in the Management of Library, Information and Archive Services* (1987) include profiting through the sale of stolen materials, the desire to gain possession of specific items, theft through "borrowing" with the intent to return, theft to purge records containing information perceived as harmful to the thief or his associates, and "malicious theft stemming from grievances against an institution" (p. 9). Additional motives cited by Griffiths and Krol include alcohol or drug dependency and the emergence of personal problems that, "over time, erode [a thief's] professional and personal ethics" (p. 9). Cryan (2006) cites a 1992 survey by Byunn and Lau which questioned academic library patrons about library book mutilation and theft:

> They found that the most common response to why material was stolen or destroyed was
>
> that patrons needed material that could not be checked out. Other reasons high on the list
>
> were "lenient penalties for stealing" and "inadequate security measures." (p. 29)

Cryan also mentions academic pressure, convenience, economic conditions, and embarrassment at checking out particular items as additional reasons (p. 29). Brown-Syed (1999) describes "systematic" book theft such as that perpetrated by Blumberg and Shinn as a phenomenon in need of further research by psychologists and behavioral scientists in collaboration with librarians and archivists. Clearly, there are many reasons people steal materials from libraries.

Materials at risk of being stolen. As the cases cited above clearly demonstrate, libraries possess a variety of materials at risk of being stolen, including rare books and manuscripts, out-

of-print books, costly art and medical books, computer equipment, DVDs, CDs, other

audiovisual materials, and even digital content. Cryan (2006) cites statistics that suggest that

"new books, DVDs, CDs and video games are very attractive to thieves" and asserts that "among

books, non-fiction is the most desirable, and within this category, books on pets, computer

manuals, true crime and antiques are most commonly stolen" (p. 29). She cites Mosley's 1996

findings that the top three stolen books were *The Joy of Sex* and its sequels, *G.E.D. Exam* books,

and *Prophecies of Nostradamus* (p. 29). Map collections may also be targeted by thieves; in

March of 2008, James L. Brubaker of Montana was arrested and charged with interstate

transportation of stolen goods in relation to the February 2006 theft of at least 648 maps stolen

from Western Washington University's Wilson Library that were found on his property

("Librarian," 2008). McGinty (2008) points out that "the range of theft possible in an academic

or public library extends from books, equipment, and media materials to art, display items,

money, and personal belongings" (p. 118). Mounce and Mounce (2008) describe incidences of

theft of coins from copy machines and cash from a library's petty cash fund (p. 14), and Holt

(2007) relates instances of employee theft of items such as electronic materials, materials

forming cataloging backlogs, research materials, and the same "holy trinity" of materials

frequently stolen by library users: religious books, test manuals, and cooking/recipe books. In

addition, Holt points out that items such as toilet paper, office supplies, paper, tablets, sticky

notes, pens, pencils, storage boxes, light bulbs, carpet, and furniture are vulnerable to theft by

library employees and that employees have also been involved in the theft of data, such as that

found in patron circulation records, and time, as when conducting a side business during library

working hours (p. 85). On a similar note, Begg (1984) emphasizes that "the theft of books or

other objects from library collections represents only one dimension of the larger problem of

theft, embezzlement, or misuse of library assets" by insiders (p. 337).

Libraries at risk of being targeted for theft. Theft is a problem confronting libraries

and archival collections of all sorts. Whether serving the general public, K-12 students, college

or graduate students, medical personnel and patients, or the employees of a private business,

every library is vulnerable to theft. As Mounce and Mounce (2008) assert, "If a library director

thinks that theft is unlikely, he or she is dreaming" (p. 17); furthermore, "just because a library

has not uncovered theft or misuse of its resources does not mean that wrongdoings…have not

occurred" (p. 15).

Unfortunately, as Cryan (2006) describes, the large degree of variation in the level of

theft among libraries makes the study of crime in libraries difficult. She quotes Lincoln's 1984

statement that "studies suggest variation may be the norm, not only from library to library but

within a single library from one time to another" (p. 29). In addition, even between libraries

similar in size, security, staffing, and socioeconomic status, levels of theft can vary widely,

making it difficult to predict levels and patterns of theft in particular libraries. Because all

libraries are vulnerable to theft and because the prediction of theft levels and patterns is so

difficult, it is very important for libraries to employ strategies for managing theft, a matter

discussed later in this paper.

Perpetrators of library theft. As we have seen, perpetrators of theft in libraries come

from both inside and outside the library organization. As Mounce and Mounce (2008) point out,

traditionally, "the emphasis on library theft has been on catching and preventing patrons from

plundering the inventory of books and journals" and "deterrence of theft in a university library

environment is generally targeted at student activities" (p. 13). As Cryan (2006) asserts in

relating the results of Byunn and Lau's survey of academic library patrons about library book mutilation and theft, "it is clear that book theft is often a crime committed casually, without much forethought or even intentional malice" (p. 29).

However, as we have seen, some library theft is perpetrated by more sophisticated criminals such as Blumberg, Shinn, and Brubaker. These types of large-scale, organized thefts not only cost libraries large sums of money in replacement costs, administration, maintenance of security systems, and security personnel but also result in the loss of library reputation and staff morale "and the overall feeling of compromised personal safety in a library plagued by theft" (Cryan, 2006, p. 30). As discussed above, these types of criminals may be motivated by the prospect of profit or a passion for materials related to specific subjects or in specific formats; whatever their motives, the damage they inflict can be considerable.

But perhaps the largest risk to library collections and assets comes from within. The threat from "insiders" has been the topic of considerable discussion in the professional literature. Even as far back as 1984, it was "estimated that twenty-five percent of all library thefts [were] 'inside jobs'" (Begg, p. 338). Griffiths and Krol (2009) define insiders as "regular staff, as well as temporary and contract-based staff, trusted vendors, interns, volunteers, board and committee members, and esteemed affiliates such as former staff, frequent patrons, and donors," whose "knowledge of collections…makes them a greater danger than infrequent visitors" (p. 8). Griffiths and Krol assert that "insiders have the access and the means to do catastrophic damage to collections as well as to institutional morale and public image" (p. 5), and their assertion is supported by several recent cases. In 2003, Kenyon College in Ohio was awarded over $1 million in a judgment against former library circulation night supervisor David Breithaupt and his accomplice Christa Hupp, who stole and sold hundreds of rare items from the college library

starting in the mid-1990s (Eberhart, 2003). In 2004, a warrant was issued for the arrest of Phenix City, Alabama librarian Irma Duke, who allegedly stole more than $50,000 from the library by writing illegal checks (Rogers, 2004). In 2008, arrest warrants were issued for three people accused of overcharging the Sacramento Public Library (SPL) in California for maintenance work, including two former SPL employees, and the accused faced grand theft and bribery charges (Blumenstein, 2008, p. 17). According to Blumenstein,

> the former library maintenance director and the former security director and his wife had been overcharging the library by about $650,000 since 2004. The library commissioned an investigation and found that the SPL security chief is the husband of the owner of Hagginwood Services Inc., which provided the fraudulent invoices, and he was the sole library administrator who approved those invoices. (p. 18)

In another 2008 case, former archivist Daniel D. Lorello pleaded guilty to stealing and selling more than $50,000 in historic documents and artifacts from the New York State Library and Archives in Albany ("Archivist," 2008). Mounce and Mounce (2008) assert that "personal characteristics, such as age, do not appear to reduce the risk of theft" (p. 17), an assertion supported by the diversity of perpetrators of insider theft. Griffiths and Krol (2009) agree: "insider theft is not necessarily linked with income, administrative position, or length of tenure. In fact, one major obstacle to combating insider theft seems to be its relative unpredictability" (p. 9).

Legal Considerations

Laws pertaining to the theft of library materials in the United States vary from state to state. According to the Web site of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), "individual state laws pertaining to

thefts of and damage done to library materials…vary widely in their coverage and applicability, and several states appear to have none" (ACRL, 2009b, para. 1). For those states that do have library theft laws, punishments for theft generally vary according to the severity of the theft and the thief's previous criminal record.

For large-scale thefts of "objects of cultural heritage" such as historic documents and rare or antique manuscripts, punishments can be quite severe. As McDade (2008) explains, in November 2002, U.S. federal sentencing guidelines were revised to recognize the severity of crimes against cultural heritage resources, adding to the severity of sentences for those convicted of such crimes (pp. 6-7). While "crimes that are prosecuted at the state level are still subject to the vagaries of the individual state criminal laws" (p. 12), "these crimes are treated, at the federal level at least, with a recognition of their unique nature" (p. 11).

Strategies for Managing the Issue of Theft

As we have learned, theft is a major problem in libraries today. Theft can be extremely costly to libraries and it is often perpetrated by employees or others with inside knowledge of the library's collection, organization, and resources. However, various strategies exist for the prevention and detection of library theft, and by employing such strategies and developing new ones, libraries can protect themselves against the harm caused by theft.

Historical Strategies

In ancient Egypt, gods, goddesses, and book keepers were used to secure the library collections; "the fear of angering the gods was an effective deterrent to the would-be thief" (Johansson, 1996, pp. 52-53). Later, monasteries enacted new security measures such as the use of registers to record which books were lent and marking the name of the issuing library on books. Another historically popular security measure has been the use of curses, which,

according to Lawrence Thompson, have been used since at least 627 AD in the West (cited in

Johansson, 1996, p. 53). Johansson provides several examples of curses, including one from a

1540 English volume:

> My master's name above you see,
>
> Take heede and therefore you steale not mee;
>
> For if you doe, without delay
>
> Youre necke for me shall pay.
>
> Look doune below and you shal see
>
> The picture of the gallowstree;
>
> Take heede therefore of thys in time,
>
> Lest on this tree you higly clime. (p. 54)

According to Johansson, "Security techniques to minimize theft and mutilation have changed

relatively little from the time the curses were implemented…up to the time of the electronic theft

detection systems. To be sure, the technology or specific application has changed, but the

underlying ideas have not" (p. 55). In recent decades, electronic security systems employing

magnetic strips or RFID technology have become commonplace in libraries as a means of

preventing and detecting theft of library materials. In addition to such exit control measures,

Johansson highlights supplemental measures that have included disabling the opening of

windows, improving patron visibility for staff members, using institutional markings and

bibliographic control, and implementing user education programs to "convey to patrons how

costly the replacement materials are to obtain, the additional problems their acts cause, and even

why the library chose to implement an [electronic security system]" (p. 59). Another important

development in library security has been the development of guidelines for preventing and

responding to library theft.

ACRL's "Guidelines regarding security and theft in special collections"

In September of 2009, the Board of Directors of ACRL approved the "ACRL/RBMS

guidelines regarding security and theft in special collections," which replaces the separate

"Guidelines for the security of rare books, manuscripts, and other special collections" and

"Guidelines regarding thefts in libraries" (ACRL, 2009a, p. 593). The guidelines state that

"while directed primarily toward special collections in the U.S., many topics are also applicable

to general collections and to special collections in other countries" (p. 593). Part I of the

guidelines focuses on security measures that can be taken to prevent theft and includes the

following suggestions:

- Appoint a library security officer.

- Develop a written policy on the security of the collections.

- Limit access points to the special collections building, unit, or area.

- Practice careful personnel management.

- Require registration for each researcher who uses special collections materials, including

  the name, address, legal acknowledgment, and any institutional affiliation. Keep records

  of collections researchers will be using.

- Keep adequate accession records, maintain detailed cataloging records and lists in finding

  aids, record copy-specific information, and keep condition reports and records. Apply

  unique ownership marks. Segregate more valuable items from the collections into higher

  security areas, with more restricted conditions for staff access and researcher use.

- Catalog all materials as fully as institutional resources and descriptive practices will allow. Record copy-specific characteristics and bibliographic information that helps to distinguish among editions, issues, and states. Conduct regular inventories of both cataloged and uncataloged book collections and other collections when possible. Maintain a shelflist in a secure area. Maintain up-to-date records of unlocated items and periodically recheck them; consider reporting missing items to appropriate agencies. Cancel marks of ownership when deaccessioning items and keep careful, detailed records of deaccessions.

- Know and communicate to staff the laws and institutional policies pertaining to library and archival theft. Report thefts promptly to appropriate law enforcement agencies.

- Work with the institutional administration to ensure its support for the prosecution of thieves. Work with appropriate institutional, local, and state groups to lobby for strengthening state laws regarding library and archival thefts and for diligent prosecution of such crimes.

Part II of the guidelines focuses on strategies for responding to thefts. Its suggestions include the following:

- Formulate an action plan for dealing with theft.

- In responding to a theft in progress, if suspicions are sufficiently aroused, immediately summon both a witness and the library security officer and, if possible, capture the suspect's actions on a security camera. Follow institutional policies and applicable state laws concerning the incident. If there is probable cause that a theft has occurred, request that a police officer place the suspect under arrest. As soon as possible, write a

description of the suspect's physical appearance and an account of the entire event as
witnessed or related.

- Subsequent to an incidence of theft, gather evidence and report to appropriate organizations and agencies, such as local booksellers, electronic mailing lists and national stolen and missing book databases. Assist with prosecution. Arrange for the return of located stolen materials.

The appendices include guidelines for marking books, manuscripts, and other special collections materials, drafts of model legislation regarding theft and mutilation of library materials, and a directory of resources. Adherence to the ACRL guidelines by libraries of all types, especially those housing special collections, will make a significant difference in preventing and discovering thefts and in responding appropriately to thefts that do occur.

Internal Control

While the ACRL guidelines focus primarily on preventing theft by library users, others have focused on preventing insider theft. According to Begg (1984),

> The methods and procedures necessary to prevent or at least to decrease the opportunity for theft, fraud, or embezzlement by library employees is inherent in the concept of internal control…Internal control consists of the plan of organization and all of the methods and procedures adopted within a library to safeguard assets, to insure the reliability of accounting data, to promote operational efficiency and to secure adherence to established managerial policies. (p. 337)

Begg posits that there are two broad categories of internal control—accounting controls and administrative controls—and that "many librarians through education or experience have a sound understanding of administrative control mechanisms since these are usually covered in general

management and personnel courses in library schools" (p. 338). He therefore focuses his

discussion on accounting controls, identifying three broad functions of management comprising

the system of accounting controls:

1. planning by budget or other standard of comparison;

2. operation of an effective accounting and record-keeping system which incorporates

   internal check;

3. personnel management practices which aid in safeguarding assets and in reducing the

   opportunity for fraud. (p. 338)

Begg argues that "accounting controls specifically aid the librarian in safeguarding the library's

assets and provide assurance that the documents produced by the library's accounting system are

reliable and accurate" (p. 342), thus reducing the risk of insider theft.

Mounce and Mounce (2008) continue the discussion of internal control, citing the work

of Begg as well as Arens, Elder and Beasley's *Auditing and Assurance Services: An Integrated

Approach* (2005). They assert that "a system of internal control consists of five elements: the

control environment, risk assessment, control activities, information and communication, and

monitoring" (p. 16). According to Mounce and Mounce, the control environment reflects the

overall attitude of the top management of the organization. Risk assessment includes

consideration of the risks posed to not only items within the stacks but also cash receipts and

cash disbursements. Control activities are the policies and procedures, either manual or

automated, put in place to prevent or detect theft in the ordinary daily activities of the library,

and fall into five broad categories:

1. separation of duties;

2. authorization;

3. documentation and recordkeeping;

4. safeguarding of assets;

5. accountability. (p. 17)

A system of accounting information and communication, including "initiation, recording, processing, and reporting transactions and maintaining accountability for the related assets" (p. 18) is essential to internal control, as is monitoring involving ongoing or periodic assessments of the other elements in the internal control system to assess their effectiveness. Mounce and Mounce conclude that "a good system of internal control is as important in a library environment as it is in the business world. When employees and patrons are aware that a system is in place and is being followed, theft is less likely to occur" (p. 20).

Griffiths and Krol (2009) reiterate many of the points made by Begg (1984) and Mounce and Mounce (2008), but they also highlight some additional measures that can be taken to help prevent insider theft in libraries. Employee screening, including reference, employment, criminal and personal history checks, they argue, "can reveal clues about a potential employee's overall reliability as well as warning signs for theft" (p. 11). Controlling access to secure spaces through the careful selection of staff permitted to work directly with collections and through the stipulation of strict "no exceptions" policies can be important in preventing insider theft (p. 12), as can intellectual control consisting of tight limits on access to the means of altering bibliographic records and monitoring of staff who process archival collections (p. 12). Other important security measures mentioned by Griffiths and Krol include marking items, which assists in recovery and also discourages theft by making stolen items easy to identify (p. 12), publicity of theft and the publication of theft and mutilation reports (p. 13), and consistency in the overall commitment to established security policy (p. 14).

Building Design

McGinty (2008) examines the issue of theft from a design perspective, arguing that "theft prevention in building design starts with planning where circulation and security desks will be located to monitor book detection systems and control movement of patrons as they enter and leave the building" (p. 118). He advocates for the use of electromagnetic or radio frequency book detection systems not only because of their ability to alert staff when an item is being taken out of the library without being checked out but also because "the deterrence factor of installing the system at the entrance and exit of a building will warn thieves that security is a priority" (p. 119). He also argues that closed stack arrangements and limited access provide the best security for valuable collections and that "usage of noncirculating materials should always be in open areas in view of library staff" (p. 119). The use of design principles such as these can go a long way in preventing library theft.

Employee Training and Ethics

In his 2006 article "Borrowing Privileges," Michael Rogers presents a hypothetical situation in which one librarian witnesses another stealing large quantities of office supplies and surplus books and DVDs. The thief justifies her actions by stating that she is entitled to the materials because of library work she has to perform at home during non-working hours. The scenario is accompanied by analysis from two professional librarians, both of whom point out that the thief's behavior "brings up questions about competence, trust, and accountability." While the article does not make any suggestions for how libraries should prevent or respond to situations such as the one described, it does highlight the importance of employee training and ethics. In organizations in which security and ethics are not emphasized as critical aspects of employee performance, the danger of situations such as this occurring is profound. While the

American Library Association and other professional associations do posit codes of ethics to

which library personnel should adhere, it is up to individuals and individual organizations to

continually stress the critical importance of ethical behavior. By creating a culture of safety,

security, and ethical behavior, libraries can make great strides in the prevention of theft.

Conclusion

As numerous cases demonstrate, theft of library materials by both insiders and users of

libraries is a significant problem facing libraries today. As no library is immune to the problem

of theft, it is essential that all libraries protect themselves by implementing strategies to prevent

and respond to theft. Many recommendations for such strategies can be found in the guidelines

of professional associations such as ACRL and in the professional literature, and further

development of theft prevention and response strategies will help to ensure that libraries are

protected from theft well into the future, safeguarding our shared cultural heritage as embodied

in library collections for many generations to come.

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